‘Like a Chemist from Canada’

The true story of Shostakovich’s visit to Oxford in 1958

A new play written by Lewis Owens, directed by Annabel Arden and produced by EdmissionUK

• Duke’s Hall, Royal Academy of Music, London on 14 June 2015
• The Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford on 3 July 2015

by Lewis Owens

Ten years ago, with the help of Henry Hardy and the encouragement of the DSCH Journal and Alan Mercer, I published a collection of telegrams and letters surrounding the visit of Shostakovich to Oxford in 1958 to receive his honorary doctorate. The correspondence was largely self-explanatory with a clear chronology: so why re-explore it and why, more ambitiously, adapt the episode for stage a decade later? Several reasons came to mind: firstly, the story is a fascinating, humorous, and poignant portrayal of the clash between two distinct, and distinctly insular, worlds: the Byzantine rituals and orotundity of Oxford University, typified by the Public Orator’s Address to Shostakovich, composed in Latin, and the unsmiling officialdom of 1958 Soviet Russia. When Shostakovich finally arrives in Oxford for his three-day stay, hosted by Isaiah Berlin, we are presented not only with a unique insight into the inner personalities of Shostakovich, Berlin, and others, but also a searing reminder of the value of art in the Cold War period. More specifically, we have a long and poignant letter of Berlin (later published by Henry Hardy in the official Berlin correspondence) that contains his astonishing ruminations on the significance of Shostakovich’s visit. Berlin conceives of the composer as living in “an artificial nineteenth century,” and notes the effect of censorship and imprisonment in a totalitarian regime on creative genius—“It limits but deepens it.” A picture ultimately emerges of Shostakovich as a pawn of the Soviet Embassy, and his palpable terror of the regime it represents is haunting, but there is also comedic value in Berlin’s account of his attempt to evade the two Soviet officials acting as Shostakovich’s bodyguards for the visit. In all this, we have the basis of a very interesting historical reconstruction of an important event that recognises and acknowledges the genius of Shostakovich. Nevertheless, I believe that if we look deeper we can add a contemporary significance to this historical foundation. How much has really changed since 1958? Are we, as Gorbachev recently declared, entering a new Cold War? How many more innocent victims will be caught in the cross-fire between Russia and Ukraine? The play is dedicated to the 298 victims of the MH17 flight that came down, tragically, over Ukrainian air-space on July 17, 2014, and while the play does not propose any explicit political message, it seeks to raise more questions than answers.

As a first-time playwright, I have the advantage of basing the script on existing historical documents as much as I judge appropriate, while heeding the pitfalls of stifling the naturalism of the conversation by transferring the written word directly in the mouths of the characters. For this, and other challenges, I have been grateful to the play’s director, Annabel Arden, for guidance.

There is inevitable bias in much of the correspondence, not least in Berlin’s letter. For him, the climactic moment of the visit is when Shostakovich himself takes to the piano at an arranged soiree and plays a prelude and fugue (no. 24 in D minor) that not only upstages Poulenc, another degree recipient, but also offers a picture of the liberating and transcendent power of music (Shostakovich is transformed and forgets his terrors, and Berlin is left feeling that the art of the West is hopelessly decadent by comparison). The truth, though, may be slightly different. After interviewing the cellist Roham de Saram, who performed the cello sonata at the soiree for Shostakovich at the tender age of 19, I was offered another take on Shostakovich’s performance. The composer seemed clearly out of practice and lost his place in the fugue on several occasions. Not quite the epiphany described by Berlin. Not that this matters, in my opinion, but it has opened my eyes to the many difficulties of basing a script purely on selected letters.

Alongside the creativity of Annabel Arden (Théâtre de Complicité founding member) and a cast of highly enthusiastic and motivated actors, we also have the brilliance of pianist Colin Stone and mezzo-soprano Clare McCaldin to offer a necessary musical flavour to the play. Like all works of art, Like a Chemist from Canada will appeal to some more than others. However, if people leave with more questions than answers and are reminded that 2015 is the 40-year anniversary of Shostakovich’s death, then this project will not have been in vain.