

Reviews

Here come the hotsteppers

In pictures: Diaghilev and the golden age of the Ballets Russes guardian.co.uk/dance



Shostakovich's struggle to survive a time of tumult laid bare

Theatre

A Model for Mankind

Cock Tavern, London

★★★★★

On the days when it is not presenting its celebrated, scaled-down *La bohème*, this tiny Kilburn pub theatre is offering a rather different vision of the artistic life. This new play by American James Sheldon, a former investment banker, is about the tortured creative life of Dmitri Shostakovich. And, while the piece is structurally convoluted, it offers a graphic picture of the insidious impact of tyranny on the artist's existence.

The play's outer shell consists of the testimony offered to a Soviet sub-committee in 1979 by Shostakovich's doctor and best friend, Anton Albedov. The aim of the committee is clear: to prove that the composer's sceptical memoirs, published in New York, were a forgery and that he was always a loyal servant of the state who was prepared to shop a dissident poet, Issak Bashevsky, to the authorities.

But the play then flashes back in time, over the years from 1927 to 1953, to show Anton's real recollections of Shostakovich. What emerges is a complex portrait of a man pressurised by both renegade artists and the state, forced into all kind of political contortions in order to survive but ultimately incapable of an act of private treachery.

Sheldon is at his best in recreating the feverish insanity of the Stalin years: as



Feverish insanity ... the cast of *A Model for Mankind* Photograph: Tristram Kenton

Anton reminds us, it was even assumed doctors would become redundant since the end of the class struggle would mean the elimination of sickness.

The play also recalls the shock to Shostakovich's system of hearing his great opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, denounced in 1936 as "a deliberately discordant muddle of sounds".

But, while it is salutary to be reminded of the Soviet past, Sheldon gets bogged down in the did-he-or-didn't-he issue of whether Shostakovich betrayed Isaak. Unlike the question of whether Shaffer's Salieri killed Mozart, it is not strong enough to sustain the play. I also wish Sheldon had paid more attention to the actual music since, as Andrew Porter once wrote: "Shostakovich's symphonies are the public biography of a great musician in relation to Soviet art."

But Blanche McIntyre, fresh from directing Bulgakov's *Moliere*, which also dealt with the artist in an autocracy, clarifies the key issue of the daily dilemmas faced by Shostakovich.

The performances are outstandingly good. Richard Keightley makes the composer a plausibly harassed, conscience-plagued figure; Paul Brendan is all no-nonsense truculence as the testifying doctor and Shereen Martineau doubles effectively as an advocate and Shostakovich's translator-lover. Sheldon, as a relative theatrical novice, has tried to cram too much in. But I can forgive the play its faults for its willingness to tackle big issues in a little Kilburn room.

Michael Billington

Until 17 April. Box office: 0844 4771 000