

THE PUBLIC REVIEWS

March 31, 2010

A Model For Mankind – Cock Tavern Theatre, London

Writer: James Sheldon

Film Director: Adam Tyler

Director: Blanche McIntyre

Reviewer: Deborah Klayman

The Public Reviews Rating: ★★★★★



Well written, staged and acted, the world premiere of James Sheldon's 'A Model For Mankind' is an intriguing, enjoyable piece of theatre. Set in 1979, and flashing back to the Stalinist Soviet Union, the play examines the life and legacy of the composer Dmitri Shostakovich during a period of political unrest and uncertainty that culminated in the arrest, exile or execution of many of the U.S.S.R.'s artistic elite.

The play begins with Doctor Anton Albedov being called to testify to a sub-committee about the conduct of his friend during that difficult period, some four years after the composer's death from lung cancer. As he recalls encounters, they come to life with both the Commisar and Advocate doubling as characters from Shostakovich's life, and Albedov appearing as his younger self. The writer's choice to double cast the characters works very well, and both Jack Lewis (Commisar/Andrei) and Shereen Martineau (Advocate/Yelena) are very convincing in

their dual roles. Paul Brendan's Albedov is ever-present, with the actor there even when the character technically isn't, which was very effective as it reminds the audience that the Doctor is in reality recounting the story, retaining the feeling that this is only one man's account of Shostakovich's days. Both Brendan and Richard Keightley (Shostakovich) are outstanding as the two lifelong friends, performing the text with an integrity and attention to detail that is very compelling. The cast of five is completed by Jonathan Bonnici as poet and provocateur Issak Bashevsky.

Lucy Read's design is very effective, making the very most of the intimate space and allowing for images and film to be projected on the rear wall. This also helps to follow the sometimes complicated timeline, as dates and locations are also projected at the beginning of scenes. It is also well staged by Blanche McIntyre, making sense of the sometimes convoluted structure and using only minimal scene and costume changes so as not to distract from the action taking place. Supported by superb films by Adam Tyler, one of the finest moments in the play has Bashevsky's murder projected at the back while the bare-chested Bonnici looks on.

Aside from the political machinations going on around them, the play is in essence a story about friendships under extremely difficult circumstances, and we see Shostakovich forced to betray Bashevsky in order to protect his family. Ultimately a beautiful parallel is drawn as Albedov is asked to replicate the treacherous letter, and in doing so make the same choice – to betray his friend to save his loved ones. The 110 min play could do with some simplifying and would also benefit from going straight through as the interval arrives very abruptly breaking the flow of the piece, but is extremely well performed and holds your attention right to the end.