

Philistines ★★★★★

Royal National Theatre, 30 May 2007
Reviewed by **Malcolm Rock**

SOME slouch fatigued on windowsills watching others take pleasure in birdsong and mushroom-picking, but every character in Maxim Gorky's *Philistines* wants desperately to live.

Director Howard Davies turns Gorky's 1902 play about weary world wanderers into a majestic life-affirming event thanks to Andrew Upton's restless new translation that overlaps, doubles back then hangs; distracted, dawdling, indecisive, mirthful.

Upton matches the play's lavish philosophising with colloquial turns of phrase and outrageously funny throw-away lines that give Gorky's perceptive account of an imploding early 20th-century bourgeois Russian family new life.

Ruth Wilson gives a shattering performance as the almost spectral Tanya who haunts the shadows of Bunny Christie's moody, brown-tiled, right-angled set. With her diffident brother Pyotr (Rory Kinnear) – who has been suspended from university for political activism – Tanya lingers as love evades her and the non-world she inhabits decays with help from her disparaging, iron-fisted father Vassily Bessemenov (Phil Davis).

Davis makes a duly tyrannical patriarch whose authority over his family and the resentful tenants populating his sub-divided house is floundering at the dawn of the revolution. Threatened by the learning he senses but eludes him he resorts to bigotry that castrates his son and alienates his wife while unwittingly grooming his suicidal daughter into the heir of his undoing.

For this doomed family even the furniture is source of silent ridicule: from the cupboard's refusal to "do something" to the pewter samovar whose mere weight even at distance becomes a mountain upon shoulders.

Technicolour tenants Perchikin (Duncan Bell) and Elena (Justine Mitchell) assert themselves in the Bessemenov household bringing

much-needed levity and lust with their stories of chasing bullfinches and hating people's problems.

Disintegrating as they devour misery, both the young and old in *Philistines* become "cunning villains and foolish heroes" who take pleasure in pain while finding pleasure painful.

What a guilty pleasure to have so enjoyed this pain.

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Seven Deadly Sins ★★★★★

Royal Opera House, 27 April 2007
Reviewed by **Malcolm Rock**

DANCERS in their delicacies seem to have characterised the Royal Ballet's *Seven Deadly Sins*, but white-pantalooned Pierrot Lunaire still proves the most affecting part of this lively loss-of-innocence triple-bill at the Royal Opera House.

Writer Bertolt Brecht and composer Kurt Weill's 1933 morality tale *The Seven Deadly Sins* opens the evening with two Annas, dancer Zenaida Yanowsky and folk songstress Martha Wainwright, embarking on a journey to "the great big cities where you go to make the money". Leaving behind the safety of the bright earnest Louisianan moon, the Annas travel from town to town finding themselves the subject of desire, violence, pornographic films and eventually hollow Hollywood glamour.

Wainwright narrates the action through sung Brechtian verse as Yanowsky spends minutes at a time carried from bed to bed, between one man and the next, at the mercy of each deadly sin. Yet, in dark garters and bra, Yanowsky remains the controlling force within the sordid whirlwind of hysterical shoulder lifts and aggressive embraces.

Will Tuckett's choreography is hardened and passionate with a restrained bed etiquette that includes just enough groping and grinding to suggest a world concerned with sleaze.

The destruction of Pierrot and his light lunar life at the hands of Brighella continues to be the perfect meeting of contemporary and classical ballet matched with dynamic vocals. The late Glen Tetley's *Pierrot Lunaire*, set to Arnold Schoenberg's sung score, introduces us to commedia dell'arte clown Pierrot swinging from rail to rail alone atop a scaffolding tower - a dreamer reaching for the moon.

Guest principal Alexander Zaitsev (of Stuttgart Ballet) is exceptional as the fragile Pierrot whose broad red smile and contented solitude is ended

by the arrival of Mara Galeazzi's mischievous masquerading lush Columbine and veiled corruptor Brighella – a splendidly provocative Edward Watson. From his seductively menacing entrance to panto-phallic sport with his victim, Watson's Brighella strips Pierrot first of his innocence then his clothing, leaving Zaitsev shattered with sweating white make-up descending his bare chest as we mourn his bruised soul and bleeding knees.

Zaitsev's joyfully playful allegro is transformed by the mocking and manipulating conspirators into grounded agonizing contortions, every gesture now an excruciating humiliation and psychological torment. An ambiguous ending leaves us wondering whether our gentle hero has at last embraced blemished reality or is now – unable to view the heavens without support – doomed.

La Fin du Jour is a delightful parade of peach, watermelon, hot-pink and lavender couture in the between-war 1930s. Designer Ian Spurling's pastel beige interior (including face-shaped flats that, god-like, overlook proceedings) provides the perfect insular stage for the buoyant solos and pas de deux of Natasha Oughtred, Mara Galeazzi, Johannes Stepanek and Valeri Hristov.

Part one sees the two girls don bathing suits and aviator goggles as they swim and fly through the scene's undisturbed tranquillity with the assistance of some half-a-dozen colourfully dressed males. Their suspended gestures seem distant, as if viewed through opaque glass, yet wholly appropriate in their oblivious conviction. Stepanek and Hristov take centre-stage during part two, their triumphant turns in smart brightly-coloured tailed suits conveying a careless enthusiasm and festive decadence at one with choreographer Kenneth MacMillan's affair with the glamorous period.

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