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World Business Newspaper

Arts

Faust's magic is accessible to all



Nigel Andrews
IN VENICE

The angels made them do it. With a daring and justice that should be recorded in Venetian history, the jury of the 68th Mostra del Cinema gave the Golden Lion to Aleksandr Sokurov's *Faust*. The story of a medieval doctor crossing the threshold between good and evil comes to life in a Russian-directed, German-speaking masterpiece. The film baffled and exasperated some, including a Herald Tribune critic who gave it one star among a blaze of fives, but it exalted and astonished most of us.

We see, hear and almost smell the Middle Ages. We are transported, bumpily but thrillingly, through changing moods: comedy, tragedy, romance, fable. We are teased with caricature – including a Mephistopheles of grotesque shape and swaggering menace, brilliantly played by Anton Adasinsky – and awed by beauty, from Isolda Dychauk's Margarete to cliffs and forests out of Caspar David Friedrich. In the last reel, Sokurov all but blows our socks off. The film goes onward and upward in outlandish landscapes to a conclusion that seems to be not of this world, nor of any we have foreseen or imagined.

It was the paradoxical triumph of *Faust*, in a festival bursting with literary or theatrical adaptations, that Goethe's original is sometimes barely recognisable. The poet-playwright's text has mutated into a vision. Sokurov, for years a byword for eccentric minimalism (*Whispering Pages*, *Moloch*) alternating with flashes of quixotic virtuosity (*Russian Ark*), has made a film complete, magical and accessible to all. All, at least, save the Herald Tribune.

The film's arrival tore up the Venice form book. By the festival's midpoint we had mentally awarded the Golden Lion to either Roman Polanski (*Carnage*) or George Clooney (*The Ides of March*). In the event,

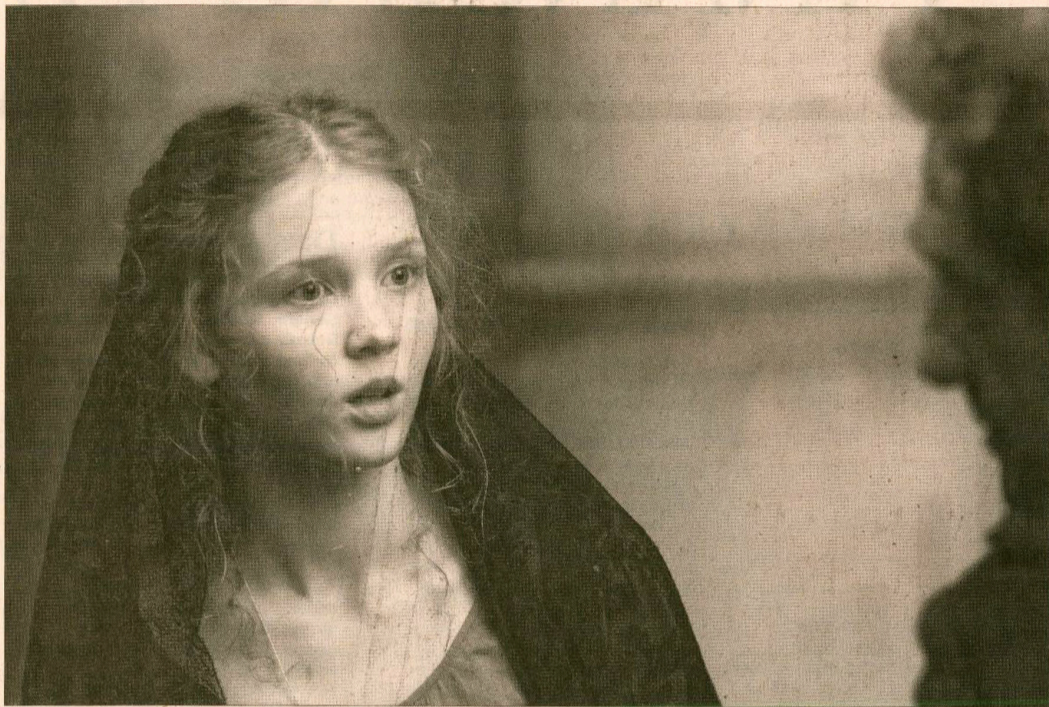
neither won anything. Was there a hint of anti-Americanism in the jury's refusal to honour the actors in either film, including Jodie Foster, John C Reilly, Paul Giamatti and Philip Seymour Hoffman, all going like express trains? Instead Britain's Michael Fassbender won Best Actor for his anguished sex addict in Steve McQueen's *Shame*. And China's Deanie Yip – there's a new name for the marquees – won Best Actress for her ageing, all-experiencing house servant in Ann Hui's touching *A Simple Life*.

Anti-Americanism? Those disagreeing could argue that US filmmaker Darren Aronofsky was head of a jury that also included US filmmaker Todd Haynes. But maybe they leaned over backwards to favour non-Americans. The subsidiary honorees were an odd selection. Italy's *Terraferma* won the runner-up Special Jury Prize. *Respiro* director Emmanuele Crialesi crafts a creaky, didactic drama about fishing crisis and illegal immigration. The Best Director Silver Lion went to Shangjun Cai for *People Mountain, People Sea*. This truth-based Chinese revenge drama had few points of commendation beyond its arrival in Venice without Chinese government knowledge or approval. It is not the first time nor, we hope, the last that the festival's selection committee has dared the wrath of officialdom in the People's Republic.

In a strong year for Britain, Robbie Ryan won and deserved the Best Cinematography prize for *Wuthering Heights*. His work here is stupendous: a weather-battered *impasto*, sluiced by lyricism, molten with changing colours, textured like a series of Turner canvases gone north. He should hang these images in a gallery and call them "Mud, rain, wind, passion".

It was, finally, a strong year for the whole festival. I haven't even mentioned Abel Ferrara's *4.44: Last Day on Earth*, a quirkily distinctive end-of-world movie, or William Friedkin's *Killer Joe*, a racily scripted Texas murder thriller. Both were American, so neither would have won. But they added to the gaiety and panache of nations, clustered under one roof in the Venice Palazzo del Cinema.

www.labiennale.org/en/cinema



THEATRE
Decade
Commodity Quay, London
★★★★☆
Ian Shuttleworth

There is both a vast amount and virtually nothing to say about this presentation, as perhaps befits the diffuseness of a production with a cast of 12 (plus a child) and 20 writers (although material from a mere 15 is presented onstage).

First, the virtually nothing. Rupert Goold directs for his company with customary flair though fewer audiovisual fripperies than one associates with him. The basement space in St Katharine Docks is dressed up as an elegant restaurant atop one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center; for the decade in question is the one since September 11 2001.

The foreword to the compendious text talks about Headlong's theatrical mission in terms of examining big subjects, asking questions. But very little examination or questioning takes place here. Goold was clear that the dramatic approach to such a watershed event had to be *collagiste*, to avoid seeming too narrow in focus or tendentious in perspective. What we get is a three-hour evening that looks at 9/11 and its war-on-terror penumbra from all angles. (Except, curiously, that of the airline passengers – are they still considered sacrosanct?) But what it sees is

nothing in particular. What is it saying beyond the obvious: that this was a big and important event? How was it important? Why? In some ways it is too obvious for words; in others too arcane.

Simon Schama, in his mini-essay delivered as a monologue, repudiates takeaway significance – "wisdom as cheeseburger". But without something to gnaw on, what is the point of the project, beyond a vaporous commemoration and a kind of communal affirmation that we all lived through this moment in history and experienced its... its what? Here the questions begin again.

Lynn Nottage's snapshot of multicultural life in the shadow of the towers is mature in its complexity. Characters move repeatedly towards and away from racist generalisations, Mike Bartlett's ultra-Mamet scene imagines the Navy Seal who killed Osama bin Laden explaining his motivation. In some ways Matthew Lopez's scenes are a microcosm of the whole, as a group of widows meet on the anniversary of the event, in reverse chronology from 2011 until 2000. In the resolute Alice especially, we see a determination that September 11 be preserved as a defining moment, but no actual definition other than the date itself.

www.headlongtheatre.co.uk

Awed beauty:
Isolda Dychauk in Aleksandr Sokurov's Faust, which won the Golden Lion; below, Cat Simmons and Samuel James in 'Decade'

Tristram Kenyon



CLASSICAL
BBC Proms
Royal Albert Hall, London
★★★★☆
Richard Fairman

The BBC Proms seem to declare a peak in audience figures at the end of each season. The announcement has become such an annual fixture that cynicism might be in order, but not this year. The Royal Albert Hall has been packed to the rafters night after night – 52 of the 74 evening concerts sold out and the average attendance was 94 per cent, an extraordinary figure for a hall of this size.

In effect, they have set themselves an Olympic-sized record to break a year early, so it is good to hear there are ambitious plans for the 2012 season. These include a complete Beethoven symphony cycle with the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra and conductor Daniel Barenboim to climax with the Ninth Symphony on the Olympics' opening night.

At least one member of the audience on Saturday was already looking ahead. Among the traditional Last Night of the Proms flags was a large, five-ringed Olympic flag waving proudly in the middle of the arena. There were also a few Chinese flags for the first time, heralding the appearance of Lang Lang, who played Liszt's Piano Concerto No.1 with a joie de vivre that could only come from a pianist who enjoys the opportunity it affords to show off.

Soprano Susan Bullock confidently predicted the end of the world in the Immolation Scene from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and then returned in the most ludicrous costume yet as a comic-book Britannia. Conductor Edward Gardner scored well on two counts: first, for the high-class playing he drew from the BBC Symphony Orchestra; and second, for a short speech.

Nevertheless, to see why the BBC Proms are such a success, the best place to look was not the last night with its high jinks, enjoyable though they mostly were, but the night before. On Friday, John Eliot Gardiner brought his Monteverdi Choir and Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique to give a concert performance of Weber's opera *Der Freischütz* in the rarely heard version made by another great composer, Berlioz. This was a revelation – stunning instrumental sounds, a good cast of light-voiced singers of the kind both Weber and Berlioz probably expected, and sizzling with theatrical flair. I name it my personal Prom of the year.

www.bbc.co.uk/proms

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