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REVIEW

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*Frauke Requardt
and Daniel Kramer*

'Pictures from an Exhibition'

*May 2009
London, Young Vic*

by Graham Watts



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I was champing at the bit for this fusion of theatre and dance, created by a winning production team and performed by a super cast, let loose on a fascinating subject (the composer, Mussorgsky) and premiered at a 'buzzing' place where dance is rarely seen. But it all flattered to deceive, with a host of appealing ingredients somehow turned into a mushy mess.

Daniel Kramer's production concentrated on the dark side of Mussorgsky's foreshortened, troubled life; opening with inspired flashes of the demons that drove him to drink his way to the grave; the sudden loss of his close friend, the artist, Victor Hartmann (which triggered the piano pieces that make up *'Pictures from an Exhibition'*), a domineering mother (Michaela Meazza) and an unkind nursemaid (Kath Duggan); his childhood insecurities represented by the giant door on one side of the set; adult temptations by the vodka vending machine on the

other; and transient human relationships evident in a huge empty portrait on the wall.

So far so good and ten minutes in, I was settling into something interesting. To be fair, there always remained the absorbing curiosity about what might happen next; but that can only work once. What followed managed to be both bizarre and banal in succeeding moments with such visual treats as plastic baby bottles strapped to the groin as erect penile metaphors and raw eggs spewed across the stage. Bottles were glugged in the way that only water can be consumed so why pretend its



vodka? Did the egg shattering at the end have something to do with the immortal Kostchei's soul?

Mussorgsky's self-destructed genius deserved a richer visual tapestry to illustrate the lyrical diversity of his *'Pictures from an Exhibition'*. Instead, the work disintegrated into a series of disconnected events, without holistic flow. Simple visual humour (such as the vending machine dispensing vodka in baby bottles) randomly punctuated Mussorgsky's episodic delusions; but these nightmares were not fuelled by a purple haze, or even the more obvious fermented grain, but seemed to spring instead from a much more sugary source; thus we had an inappropriately sexy, "bogey" woman, a couple in cute bear costumes (one of whom "urinated" in Mussorgsky's mouth) and a pair of yellow-tutu'ed, long-nosed ballerinas. The narrative direction meandered in ways that did no justice to the courageous attempts of Frauke Requardt's choreography or an excellent cast's collective effort to make this sow's ear into something silky. Both Meazza – more usually seen in Matthew Bourne's work – and Duggan did their best to keep the pot boiling; but – unsurprisingly, since the quality element was in the music that Mussorgsky had bequeathed to the production - the most engaging performer was Carl Joseph as the pianist.



The cast of *Pictures from an Exhibition*
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Then there was the fashionably unnecessary nudity. In this instance I failed to see any plausible justification for asking such talented dancers to strip and could see no excusing artistic merit in requiring them to drop a part of their dignity at the stage door for a work of such muddled ambiguity.

Mussorgsky's given name was Modest, which is an adequate summary of this disappointing endeavour.

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written by Graham Watts © [email](#)

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