

inspired by socialist fervour over the First of May, and ends with an uplifting chorus rather less integrated with the rest than Beethoven's in the Ninth. Protopopov never let one doubt for a moment how genuine the young Shostakovich was in his typical combination of sharpness and haunted lyricism, but then from the start of No 11, with its eerie picture of the deserted square before the St Petersburg Winter Palace, he underlined how far the composer had travelled by 1957, when he completed this programme symphony about the unsuccessful revolution of 1905 and its bloody suppression.

It is a comment on the composer that he wrote with such heartfelt feeling about this failure, when in the very next symphony, No 12, another programme work but based on the successful 1917 Revolution, he was by comparison treading water. The Eleventh is Shostakovich's longest symphony score, but it sustains that length as purposefully as the other epic works.

Rostropovich — with the LSO back in scintillating form — found unexpected tautness and concentration in the piece, demonstrating how Shostakovich's ostinato-based arguments can build up symphonic tensions of irresistible power, with the four movements linked in a single, unrelenting 65-minute span.

● *Messiaen's opera St Francois d'Assise*, reviewed in yesterday's *Guardian*, was staged at the Festival Hall.

Hampstead
Michael Billington

Smelling a Rat

MIKE Leigh's strength is his satirical observation of English tribal customs: his weakness is a tendency to patronising caricature. But in *Smelling A Rat* at Hampstead Theatre — his first stage piece since *Goose Pimples* in 1981 — he has found the right form for his talents. Like *Ayckbourn*, he uses the stock properties of farce to expose the dire consequences of emotional cruelty: the result is funny and extremely disturbing.

Everything stems from the unexpected return home from a Christmas holiday in Lanzarote of Rex, the monstrous boss of a pest-control firm. He is just getting ready for bed when he hears Vic and Charmaine, his deputy and wife, coming to check out the flat as arranged; so Rex pops into a wardrobe to eavesdrop on his underling. But when Rex's catatonic son, Rick, and his shoe-selling girlfriend turn up, Vic and Charmaine also hide in the closets in a sweaty mixture of guilt and panic. Part of the fun lies in the inevitability that we shall see the bodies come tumbling out of the closets and the skeletons out of the cupboards.

As in *Bedroom Farce*, the boudoir is used for almost everything except sex. Mike Leigh's prime concern is to nail the inherent destructiveness of a man like Rex (surname Weasel) who treats people as either pests to be brought under control or objects to be purchased. He is both pervasion incarnate and a feudal despot in a tartan golf-cap. When Melanie-Jane, his son's girl, hides in the bed, he tries to smoke her out as if she were a piece of vermin, and his answer to the discovery that his rejected son simply wants a bit of sexual privacy is to hurl a wad of notes at him.


Deep down, this is a political play about the new kind of sanctified millionaire entrepreneur who has wealth but no moral values. But the comedy stems largely from social observation, and while it contains elements of condescension (particularly in the character of Vic who leads every sentence with "in as much as" and who talks about the "en-suet bathroom"), it achieves a blithe accuracy in the scenes between Rock and Melanie-Jane. His taciturnity seems both a result of paternal victimisation and also Leigh's comment on a whole generation's disregard for language. The only person unfazed by it is Melanie-Jane, a pampered tease in her early twenties with all the girlish coquetry of an adolescent.

The scenes between these two take off because the actors, presumably working from improvisation, seem to have found the characters in life. Greg Cruttwell, with a thatch of wiry-church hair and the kind of long, thin face you see in the back of a spoon, suggests someone who is psychically damaged yet internally alive. Saskia Reeves, tottering about in red stilettos and drawing strands of hair across her face like a mask, is an equally astonishing mixture of provocation and shyness.

Timothy Spall's Vic, a duff-coated figure with a mechanical, braying laugh, struck me as more of a comic turn: there is an element of patronage about his verbal tics and his talk of the ascent of man leading him to reach higher kitchen units. But Brid Brennan, at last released from playing victimised Irish womanhood, is poignantly true and funny as his wife. And Eric Allan, with a tense whipcord body leading to muscular neck spasms, is suitably horrific as the airgun-brandishing Rex.

The acting is always good in a Mike Leigh show: the problem is that the characterisation often seems stronger than the plot.

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Billington on Smelling

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Mon, Feb 24, 2020