Soul of the artist under Nazism

Michael Billington

Taking Sides
Minerva Studio, Chichester

WHAT does the artist do in a brutal, totalitarian society? Can art ever claim to be above politics? It is a theme that haunts countless novels, plays and films from Mephisto to The Last Metro. It is also what gives life and energy to Ronald Harwood's Taking Sides at the Minerva Studio, Chichester, which deals with the case of Wilhelm Furtwängler, chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic during the Third Reich.

Harwood's fierce moral debate is set in the American zone of Occupied Berlin in 1946. Major Arnold, a vindictive Philistine who in private life is an insurance claims assessor, is investigating whether the maestro should come before a de-nazification tribunal. Furtwängler, for his part, initially argues that art must be kept separate from politics. Eventually he admits his naiveté, but he shifts his ground to claim that he was trying "to defend the intellectual life of my people against an evil ideology".

Harwood strives to present both sides of the argument: the American's revulsion against the privileged claims of the artist versus the conductor's idealistic belief in the transforming power of art. But what prevents a good play from being an even better one is Harwood's portrayal of the American major as a coarse vulgarian. I suspect Harwood's intention is to pit the conductor against a man who refuses to take art's claims on trust. But he thereby weakens the genuine case against Furtwängler, that he lent his prestige to a barbaric regime.

It is fascinating to observe how the debate really takes off when Harwood downplays the American's crudity. Once the major invokes the horrors of the death camps, he begins to expose the weakness of arguments about the supremacy of art. But equally, Harwood allows Furtwängler the realisation that an artist can never be entirely apolitical and that his actions have social responsibility. At moments like this the play achieves the force of dialectic.

It is directed with iron precision by Harold Pinter and quite superlatively acted. Michael Pennington as the major has the difficult task of reconciling us to a man prepared to use every dirty trick in the book, but when he delivers his final indictment he persuades us that there is moral substance to him.

Daniel Massey is also deeply moving as Furtwängler, marvellously suggesting that behind the passion for music lurks a guilty awareness of the man's complicity with a monstrous tyranny. Gawn Grainger as a collaborative violinist and Suzanne Bertish as an impassioned defender of the maestro also lend weight to a play that acts as a powerful metaphor for the present and all those post-authoritarian societies busy ransacking their pasts.

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