

Interview with Tony Palmer

Jonathan Allen

J.A. What led you to make a film about Pushkin?

T.P. *I am attracted in the films I make by people who display the kind of courage that most of us believe we never possess, whether it's Shostakovitch battling away against the state, Maria Callas battling away against her personal problems or Wagner battling away, more less, against everything. That is on the one hand. Secondly, I am preoccupied by the function of the artist. What is his job, what's he there for, what does he think he is doing. Is he pleasing himself or a general public, is he serving the state, what's he for?*

J.A. Do you believe, as Fichte proposed, that the artist has a vatic role, that in a sense he is the conscience of a nation, of the times?

T.P. *No, I don't think. Conscience suggests a deliberate process whereby the artist thinks to himself: what is the mood of the times, I better express it. I don't think the artist ever does that, or not the ones I admire. What they do is respond, if they are great and true artists, to the world in which they live. They use all their own personal experience in order to make a statement that is both personal and universal. What Pushkin did, by force of circumstance, is to define what the role of the artist was. It was't just a definition for the beginning of the nineteenth century in Russia, but for all time. He clearly saw that he had a political responsibility, and was involved in the decembrist revolution. His involvement was not direct, rather by way of inspiration. He wrote very loaded political poetry in order to inspire the revolutionaries to get rid of the Czar, and he saw this as one of his functions. He also realized that he was little more than an entertainer. He liked the idea of being a John Lennon, Mick Jagger character. The poetry he wrote could be hummed by*

all, everybody could listen to the tune. That he reckoned very important. He was't just writing obscurantist dirges that only a cultural elite would understand; he did't see that as the artist's role, with which I entirely agree. Alexander II died and was succeeded by his brother Nicholas, who was much younger and liked the idea of Pushkin. The situation is a bit like when Prince Charles opens his mouth, rather badly, about architecture, youth or culture. It's like what a really intelligent, highly sophisticated Prince Charles would be like to someone like Puskin. For instance, Prince Charles would say, "Dylan, good man, he is saying something interesting". Nicholas definitely knew that Pushkin was a very eloquent, powerful voice. Pushkin was within an inch of being killed as a traitor and revolutionary. Many of his friends were. Friendship with the Czar was certainly an important factor in keeping Pushkin alive. The deal afterwards was that Pushkin could write what he liked, including revolutionary tunes, but he had to submit everything to Nicholas who would determine if the material was politically tolerable. The most extraordinary result of this collaboration was Boris Goudonov. A great dramatic poem about a Czar who was an usurper and finally dies. A murderer who has a heart attack when confronted by another revolutionary. If you were the Czar you could't think of a more dangerous poem to write. Pushkin sent the finished poem to Nicholas and waited. It came back to him by way of Beckendorf (Nicholas's Chief of Police) full of corrections. At first, Pushkin was absolutely furious. How dare this upstart tamper with my poetry? However when he read the notes carefully he realized that the suggestions the Czar was making were rather good; they had to do with structure and focussing the attention. Here was a real editor in the contemporary sense. The text that was eventually published was definitely the collaboration between Pushkin



Catherine Palace. General View. XVIII Century.

Pushkin and the Czar, and indeed it was dedicated to Czar Nicholas I, his "co-creator".

J.A. Do you think the relationship between artist and sovereign in the case of Pushkin and Czar Nicholas I was more stable than that of Richard Wagner and Ludwig II of Bavaria, as portrayed in your film *Wagner*?

T.P. *Well, I'm not sure, I don't know. I think the relationship between Ludwig and Wagner is little understood. The collaboration I have described between Czar Nicholas and Pushkin was certainly true of Wagner and Ludwig. Wagner was a shit. Totally unpleasant, greedy, selfish, egotistical maniac. I'm sure he was that when he was born, but it got worse as he ran into insuperable bureaucratic, social, political, artistic and domestic problems. He thought that was the only way he was going to achieve what he wanted, and to an extent was right. Nonetheless, one has the feeling that Ludwig's purpose as far as Wagner was concerned was money. You come to think that Wagner used him financially. I believe from reading Cosima's diaries that somewhere at the back of his mind Wagner knew that without Ludwig the Ring would not have happened. Ludwig actually said: "Good chap Wagner I like what you are doing".*

J.A. Tony, you said Pushkin's poetry is going to be in the foreground, as a narrative... As music would be?

T.P. *Absolutely. The script has been written by the English poet Adrian Mitchell. I was very concerned about getting the poetry in (It's the first film I've made about a poet). At the beginning I could'nt think how to show Pushkin was*

a poet. When making films about composers I've always avoided those moments beloved by Hollywood when you see man going through the forest who suddenly claps his hand to his forehead and says: "My God, I hear a tune". So what we've done in the film is to ignore Pushkin is a poet. A lot of the dialogue and certainly a great proportion of the images are from Pushkin's own work. I don't expect people to know all of those images and I don't think it makes a scrap of difference whether they do. That's the way of using of poetry and I felt that it worked.

J.A. Tony, in your film text, in its composition and internal structure, there seems to be a mixture of the documentary approach to reality, pure fiction and drama. How do you view the mixture of your visual structure, of your visual text?

T.P. *It's a very good question. The answer is that Testimony, Wagner, are works of fiction. They are not an attempt to recreate reality. Shostakovitch and Stalin only met once, in a box at the ballet. Nobody knows what they said. (We can guess it) The scene in Testimony is entirely fictitious. The background detail was as accurate as we possibly could make it. In the Wagner film, an enormous amount of research went in to make sure that clothes, hairstyles, etc., were really correct. There is, of course, a limit to visual verisimilitude.*

J.A. The type of relationships that one can see certainly in the nineteenth century and perhaps in the early part of the twentieth century, between patron and artist, the type of co-creator relationship, are they at all reflected in the 1980's?

T.P. No, absolutely not.

J.A. What ingredients have disappeared to make that possible?

T.P. It's a mistake to think that any period has not depended very largely, or if not entirely, on patronage, whosoever the patron may be, the rich merchant in Amsterdam, the Catholic church or the State. There have always been good patrons and bad patrons, and it's a myth to imagine that patronage has never existed before this century. However what has absolutely changed, is the belief among artists that the State or their patrons owe them a living. That was never the case, is not the case, and the artist should never have got himself into that way of thinking. Unless the artist is pampered by the State, the Local Council, or the Common Market in Brussels, somehow the state has misunderstood what his true function is. Benjamin Britten wrote the War Requiem because it was something he wanted to write. It was incidental that Coventry Cathedral actually paid for it. No patron on earth would have commissioned Guernica yet somebody actually bought it. The relationship has changed. Now there is a general feeling that the state owes us an obligation. We live in this curious form of social democracy where all you have to do is to be born and die. The State will take care of everything else, including our artistic needs.

J.A. Certainly in the Spain of the 1980's there is a very dangerous tendency for the artist to provoke the patronage of the state in almost every possible circumstance, to pre-establish what his work is going to be and to create a project that he will present, rather than to abandon himself, to throw caution to the winds and be prepared to travel.

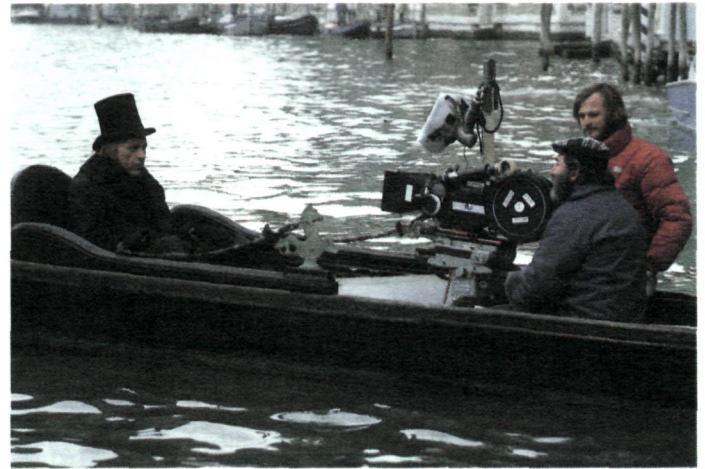
T.P. Yes, absolutely, to travel and experience.

J.A. This contemporary pressure that the artist both succumbs to and generates is very dangerous, it threatens to level off talent and genius. Creativity cannot be harnessed to a preconceived model of help.

T.P. Well, exactly. The artist is not the equivalent of a chicken factory. The State would like to think that they are, put them into serried ranks and treat them accordingly. We must not underestimate the economic problems that have arisen



"Wagner" Film of Tony Palmer.
Photo: Claudio Franzini. 1987.



"Wagner" Film of Tony Palmer.
Photo: Claudio Franzini. 1987.

in the last twenty years of the twentieth century. (We're much too close to understand them.) It's very difficult just to abandon oneself, to go away, because for better or for worse, living in one form of social democracy or another we have to pay tax, we require mortgages. There's a whole economic ethos that has descended upon common man, that has never really been there to such an all-pervading extent. False aspirations have also come about. Television is probably the greatest invention of the twentieth century. By the flick of a button you can see what is happening in most parts of the world. This inculcates a kind of semi-greed and semi-avarice. An acquisitiveness of experience and sensation. Not knowledge even, but information at a speed that is wholly unprecedented, with the result that we have the illusion of living without actually doing so.

J.A. I've somehow come to the conclusion that Victorian gentlemen reading about the Crimean war in the newspapers probably knew more about what was happening, in a strange way, than us seeing the images of the Gulf War on TV. They had a stronger relationship with the phenomenon, because a piece of news was read more intensely and discussed more passionately.

T.P. Yes. One shouldn't underestimate the power of these images. Vietnam is the most notorious case. To see Vietnam on the TV in America in the 60's completely altered one's opinion of what was going on there. You had the official government truth and then what you actually saw on TV. As it was the first time it really happened it was a shock. The trouble is, of course, that the second time round it's no longer a shock. You have the illusion of experience where as all you have is information. I say again that Television is one of the most important inventions of the century, but it precludes real experience for the less than active mind, for the less than active imagination. Lacking any real experience our aspirations are diminished. Think how the real creative artist's aspirations are diminished. It's no accident that Thomas Hardy never went beyond his Dorset valley and yet wrote these universal truths in his books. Shakespeare is an obvious case, you can't imagine anything more provincial and bourgeois than Stratford. Self-evidently something else happened in his mind. The isolation gives way to a dissipation of energy, a dissipation of real creative power.

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