

# Entertainment

## The paradox of Marxism-Leninism

Master Class  
Citadel Theatre  
til November 10

review by James MacDonald

The year is 1948. The place is Moscow. On a cold January night, the two greatest modern Russian composers, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, have been summoned to an anteroom of the Kremlin for a "chat" with their number one comrade, Joseph Stalin. Such is the scenario of David Pownall's *Master Class*, which opened the Citadel's Rice season in the Maclab theatre last week. While it fails to be engrossing, *Master Class* has beautiful moments of alternating tension and humour, and showcases four of the finest performances you may see this year.

This is a play about the paradoxes of Marxist-Leninist society; the question of Communism vs. Culture. Underlying this theme is the paradoxical nature of Stalin himself, superbly played by Len Cariou. Pownall portrays Stalin as a peasant with a rather large chip on his shoulder, at times showing remorse, at times lunacy, at times remorse for his lunacy. While perhaps not entirely historically accurate, the little known Soviet leader is brought to life by Cariou's engaging performance.

In 1948 Stalin had been in power for over 23 years, and the majority of the Stalinist purges were past. Russian music had been allowed to progress in step with Western musical tastes, while keeping its own distinct national flavouring. Now, at the Soviet Musicians' Conference, the ruling Central Committee is about to issue a decree dealing with the over-westernization of Russian music. Shostakovich, in his prime, and Prokofiev, well past his, argue in opposition to this, but face the strong intimidation of Stalin and his bullying Culture Minister, Zhdanov, and the bizarre mood twists of their aging leader. Stalin's ulterior motive is to use the two composers to translate a Georgian folk tale



Master Class: beautiful moments of alternating tension and humor

to music, using his own lyrics. The composition scene is the most effective of the play, with some excellent moments of humour contrasted with Stalin's ravings. Shostakovich and Prokofiev, having been bullied out of their original natural alliance and opposition, are stuck in a Catch-22, all the more dangerous when they realize their lives may hang in the balance. Both Michael Fawkes and Graham Harley as Shostakovich and Prokofiev, respectively, are very good. In my opinion, however, the most overpowering performance came from Michael Ball as the boorish, drunken Central Committee member.

There remains one major problem with *Master Class*. With all the intricacies brought

up by addressing such a broad topic, they are not adequately explored, and the production loses its punch. While there are some excellent moments of beautifully created subtle tension, there is nothing hard-hitting. The result is an interesting look at a rather strange situation, but it desperately lacks the power it might have had. Pownall seems unclear about what he really wants to express, and though some of his points are well taken, there is no lingering impression to take home with you. The play is also, at times, too drawn out and slightly overstays its welcome.

*Master Class* also fails by not projecting any strong sense of artistic suppression in a totalitarian society. The inaccuracies of Stalin's character historically are most glaring when one considers the millions that died in his purges or were starved to death on his orders. While it makes his character more interesting and dynamic, it detracts from the overall impression, making the creation of

any overhanging tension impossible. Stalin's flashes of insanity are powerful, but all too few, leaving an impression of a soft-hearted old lug with a rough exterior, a little frayed at the edges by a tough life. Stalin was cruel, and the play does hint at it, but it instead uses Zhdanov as the reflection of the oppressed society. This, too, is a failing, because Zhdanov is written as Stalin's underling. Also, while Ball's performance is commanding, the character is nearly written out of the last quarter of the play, losing the element of totalitarianism.

If you can ignore the historical failings and instead concentrate on the intriguing concept, you'll probably enjoy *Master Class*. There are quite a few wonderful moments, played out by four extremely good actors. The idea is original and works well as far as it goes. If you want to go, you'd better hurry, however, because, due to the scheduling in the Maclab this season, the run ends this Sunday.

*Cop story is bound together by neon spit and barbed wire*

## Live and Die cheap high

To Live and Die in L.A.  
Twentieth Century Fox  
West Mall 5

review by Myles Kitagawa

The boys in L.A. like to live fast and die hard, at least according to William Friedkin's latest film *To Live and Die in L.A.* This is a familiar story of a cop hunting down the killer of his partner, breaking all the established rules to do it. Friedkin's rendition of this particular tale, however, is bound together with neon spit and barbed wire.

Richard Chance is an agent for the U.S. Secret Service whose elder partner is savagely murdered during an investigation of a master counterfeiter. Vengeance at any cost becomes Chance's primary, and primordial, motivation. He pushes his new partner, his contacts and his organization to the breaking point to satisfy his own personal ends and when that isn't enough, Chance turns outlaw. Audiences usually admire the rebellious element in their street level authority figures, but Chance goes too far over the line, dragging us down, along with everyone else around him, almost to the level of the killer he seeks. Everybody pays during this blood hunt. Nobody gets away unscathed, not even the audience.

The pacing of this film defies its tired plot-line. Speed is the key element here. With *The French Connection* to director Friedkin's credit, it's no wonder *To Live and Die* generates the kinetic excitement it does. It's hard to escape being swept up by the film's

bizarre shots and camera movements, its complicated car chase scenes, the driving rock score with video-like editing to match, the mise-en-scene that turns suspense into a physical affliction, then being completely repulsed by violence that would have made Tony Montana flinch.

What *To Live and Die* has, above anything else, is style. The debt it owes to *Miami Vice*, though apparent, is negotiable. Friedkin employs hand held cameras for many of the scenes which seems to accelerate whatever is going on and it works well. Chase scenes become rollercoaster rides where the wheels on one side have left the tracks. The film is visually spiced with posterized color; glowing blue neon skies and the like, and there are instances where sound, which is particularly loud at West Mall 5, tells the story as vividly as sight. We really don't need to see the flies crawling on the rotting remains of Chance's partner. The sound is rich enough.

Despite its commendable visuals, *To Live and Die* suffers from its own brutality. As Chance's sense of moral right and wrong leaves him, so leaves any sense of humanity from film. *To Live and Die* bears the same affliction as Brian DePalma's *Scarface*, in that there is not a single character that you can feel good about associating with. Everyone is contaminated by the hate of Chance's obsession and everyone changes into something less than they were before. This is not a film to feel good about. Like a cheap high, *To Live and Die in L.A.* is a rush while it lasts, but when it's over, you come down hard.

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