

THE ARTS

Male MP preferred

TELEVISION
Sheridan Morley

Seventy years after Nancy Astor's arrival in the House of Commons, it remains the best men's club in the world, with fewer than 50 women among its 600 members. Even a decade and three elections after Thatcher, the ideal Conservative candidate for parliament apparently remains a middle-aged, middle-class white male with a wife, two kids and a hotback.

As if to prove that nothing much changed, 40 Minutes (BBC 2) spent last night looking at the High Peak district of Derbyshire and its continuing reluctance to allow a woman into the next House of Commons.

The programme title, "A Safe Sex for a Safe Seat", unfortunately gave away its ending, but along the route there were some wonderfully characteristic shots of Tory chairwomen and their young husbands, all appearing to be from some Beating Brothers comedy.

Those who still believe that this country has been through any kind of social, sexual or political revolution in the last ten years need no more than a weekend audit of the High Peak to remind themselves that English attitudes never die.

Elsewhere, however, one or two things are changing, not least perhaps our readiness to talk about the condom. Just 120 years after the rubber contraceptive made its public debut in the World's Fair of 1871, a weird and wonderful BBC 2 series called *Small Objects of Desire* looked at the history of sexual pleasure.

Characterised by the fact that while we referred to the French letter, the French always believed it to be an English invention, while the Germans believed it not to exist at all. However, at least condoms are no longer labelled "something for the weekend".

On TV, *This Week* interviewed a group of young Asian female runway models who were facing death threats from the husbands they are escaping. One has resorted to plastic surgery, others are hiding abroad, all are facing a culture clash which has led to groups of Moslem vigilantes roaming Birmingham.

Ironically it would seem that the immigrant community is the one progressing as fast down the path of tolerance and female emancipation as their own countries.

John Russell Taylor reviews exhibitions of Scottish and Icelandic painting

If you suggest to a Scot that the brilliant hues of the Scottish Colourists may be a reaction to the somewhat grim and greyish environment in which they found themselves, the response is likely to be aggressive.

What do you mean, no colour in Scotland? Islanders are not quite so ready with rebuttal. Yes, they say, Iceland is undeniably dark for some of the year, and no doubt a yearning for the light but brilliant summer may have a lot to do with what Icelandic artists paint.

It is, presumably, largely by coincidence that two major touring shows, one of 20th-century Scottish art and the other of 20th-century Icelandic art, should both be achieving their place in the London art scene at the same time. But since they are simultaneously in the Barbican Centre, it is natural to indulge in comparison.

I review both of them before, at their respective starting-points: Scottish Art since 1900 at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (now at the Barbican Art Gallery, to April 16), and Landscapes from a High Latitude at the Barbican Centre, to April 16.

There are, first, extraordinary parallels between the two national art scenes. The painters of both tend towards brilliant colouring, and it is not too wild a generalisation to say that the two national art scenes are in some way complementary.

The Icelandic show takes the bull by the horns, announcing in its title that it concerns landscape — though in fact landscape is defined very broadly. And, naturally, many artists represented in the Scottish show paint all sorts of things which have, superficially, little to do with landscape.

All the same, there is a general feeling that all these artists are somehow suffused with a sense of "whatsoever their paintings may be about. This is definitely true the closer they approach to abstraction: Icelanders such as Jóhann Briem, or Scots such as Joan Eardley, seem to be impelled towards abstraction through analysis of the landscape, before their eyes.



Scottish Art since 1900: "Two Women Sewing", an undated oil on canvas by Robert MacBryde, now at the Barbican Art Gallery

And yet Briem's patterns of gorgeous colour and Eardley's thurries of violently applied paint, though they take on an independent life of their own, never finally lose touch with the rocks and plants, the expanses of sky and sea, which have given them birth. In either show you could find perfect demonstrations of how the fusion we call Abstract Expressionism came about.

The fact that Iceland has such a small population makes all the more remarkable the high proportion of what are not only artists, but artists of strength and originality. It must be only geographical isolation which has prevented a figure like Jóhann S. Kjartan from being internationally recognized as a major symbolist, able to imbue the simplest scene with a humming inner mystery which compels attention.

He can find a bounding secret life in a vase of flowers, and seems to have been personally present at that primeval stage when gods and spirits walked the land.

Other Icelandic painters are

more suave and less wildly variable. Jon Stefánsson was unusual in Iceland, in that he looked more towards Paris than towards continental Scandinavia for his models. But his originality too is beyond question. And anywhere else painters such as Gunnar Schjerve and Finnur Jonsson would surely be recognized as major figures: no doubt the art market will be duly alerted.

Among the current figures, Sigurður Örgisson, with his large, slightly Mony-Prylesque paintings (dominated with sculptural exuberance) is beguilingly odd and eccentric.

I should be able to say that the course of Scottish art this century is more familiar to me than that of Icelandic. But, to the southern English, all too much remains a closed book. The reasons are sometimes similar: a lot of Scottish art, like much Icelandic, hardly crosses the national borders, not because it is rejected out of hand elsewhere, but because it has such an enthusiastic audience at home that not so much is left to

wander. However, that does not mean that we should be ignorant even of the general picture. The Barbican Art Gallery, with its sealed-off coves of concrete, is very constraining for some shows. But here each section forwards the argument, proving just a nice size for selected highlights which fall naturally together.

Scottish Colourists (with J.D. Fergusson outstanding, whether he is painting a luridly made-up turn-of-the-century lady or a camouflaged battleship in the First World War), early Modernist, meticulously slightly surrealistic, realistic; Forties followers of Picasso and Neo-Romanticism, and so on right up to the new Glasgow figurative painters: all are coherently laid out before us, following from one to another as clearly and inevitably as the graded pearls in a necklace. There is also an expressive division between upstairs (modern) and downstairs (contemporary), with

just Eardley, appropriately, bridging the two worlds. Even in Scotland, there were discoveries to be made. Edward Baird, first a Surrealist, then a Surrealist, though almost unknown, immediately takes his place alongside the already admired James Cowie as a master of that ambiguous area where the more precise everything is, the less we can feel sure of anything. Stanley Currier, with his bold and brilliant conventionalizations of everyday scenes, is an early Modernist worth detailed investigation. Robert MacBryde, always overshadowed by his companion and sometimes collaborator Robert Colquhoun, here has several works quite as strong and personal as anything by the other Robert.

And — dare not say it? — the whole show, as well as individual works in it, benefits from some compression and concentration of effect. If it does not, for the English, constitute a real, overdue revelation of the glories just across the border, it must be feared that nothing ever will.

Power to the people

Simon Tait talks to Leningrad's cultural supremo

Election cynicism has reached even the arts in Russia. We had requested an interview with Mrs Tatyana Zakharova, the deputy mayor of Leningrad responsible for arts and culture.

When we heard that it had been granted that same day, there were very smiles among our Kirov Ballet hosts. A fortnight's notice is usually required, and no guarantee even then. "She wants to get the message out that the arts and culture in Leningrad are safe under the old regime," one Kirov administrator said.

This Sunday, Leningrad elects its city council. The city's cultural future takes its place alongside such issues as food shortages, housing, unemployment, bureaucratic and financial battles with Moscow. For the first time, Mrs Zakharova and the other nine deputy mayors will form the cabinet of the council and be opposed, with the Leningrad People's Front presenting a real threat to a hitherto unchallenged Communist authority.

Leningrad's citizens are aware of the contrast between the world about classical music and dance. Teenage girls have posters of Rudinast and Lepa, the Kirov male stars, on their bedroom walls. When Stroshevich gave his two concerts a fortnight ago, students were offering Eremeev their fur hats in exchange for tickets. Each city district has its own dance school and music school.

Mrs Zakharova promises to spend nine million roubles on restoring the beautiful inner-city buildings in a "zone of care", many still derelict after the 900-day siege of Leningrad nearly 50 years ago. Some will become residential quarters, others are to be concert halls, theatres and museums.

"The programme has not been created in the absence of officers," she said. "It has been a collective work of all the creative minds, which number seven in Leningrad. The Fund is called the Fund of Renaissance."

She said that the newly restored cultural institutions can start functioning as soon as possible. "It is not accidental that the city of Leningrad is called the city of high culture," said Mrs Zakharova, speaking in the newly-restored gold and marble splendour of the former Maryinsky Palace, now the town hall. "It's our generation that now has to face the job of maintaining the buildings and monuments of Leningrad."

Alongside the Hermitage Museum, the most famous artistic "monument" is probably the Kirov Ballet. It is headed directly by the Ministry of Culture, not the city, and its director, Oleg Vinogradov, claims not to know what his budget is. He says he will go straight to Moscow.

"But we support them," said Mrs Zakharova. "For instance, three years ago we built a new residence for the Kirov dancers and those involved in the theatre. The money has not been paid back yet by the Ministry of Culture. We do hope that they will, some time."

The Kirov Ballet is now on foreign tour: in Paris, Berlin, London, Birmingham, and Italy until May. With only two weeks to go, there is great excitement at their long absence, and their inaccessibility to ordinary Leningrad residents even when they are at home.

"You have touched a raw nerve. The bulk of tickets for the Kirov are sold to foreign tourists, and a very small portion is left for the citizens. For the last two years, the management of the theatre has been trying to make it more accessible to domestic audiences. For the first time a performance was done to Leningrad students, and there was hope for orphans, but it is very difficult to make them more accessible for the short times available."

The "Renaissance" programme is due to be completed by the city's 300th anniversary in 2003.

Woyeurs, hoods and trolls

THEATRE

Benedict Nightingale

Peer Gynt
Olivier Theatre

Ibsen's insistence that *Peer Gynt* was a "dramatic poem" and "not for action" has not stopped the play surfacing regularly in the world's theatres over the past 100 years, and one or two of these productions left me feeling I had sat through the whole lot. Nearly four hours of Everyman saga can be hard on eyes, mind and body.

But both the inner and outer man should emerge pretty buoyant from Declan Donnell's revival. Somehow he has taken Ibsen's burly-burly style — early comedy, parables, near-tragedy, satire, and spiritual depth, and collected them into something fluent, pacy and simple to the point of roughness.

The tone is set at the start with Peer's mother, normally a mournful old crone, transformed by Moira Hammond into a feisty harrier chasing her impossible son round and round the stage. Throughout there is bustle and movement on boards furnished with little but a timber roof that swells or opens to become whatever Peer's wandering demands: the Troll King's realm, an upturned boat, or the African desert.

Consistently good, Kenneth McLish's translation is almost too colloquial. We get "pillock", "jet stuffed", even "bugger off". True, the fact that Ibsen wrote in rhymed verse has inhibited some translators from acknowledging



Riding high: Moira Syl as Aslitha and Stephen Moore as Peer Gynt

his bluntness. But when Peer Voss's trial talks of getting a job at the National Theatre, and Peer replies, "Break a leg" the line between the direct and the silly seems crossed.

Another worry is the doubling of Peer himself. Most of us have seen movies with different actors impersonating different ages of a character. But it is hard to think of a major play susceptible to such handling. One would not wish Hamlet to leave for England as Michael J. Fox and return as Marlon Brando; and even though this case is scarcely as extreme, the loss is more than credibility.

Young Gynt is David Morrissey, all raw imagination and unformed energy in search of objectives less dim than Norway offers. But halfway through, his eager smiles become the fly grins of Stephen Moore, whose Peer evolves from sleazy middle age to a coarse, bitter old one. Both performances are strong and un-

sentimental, but emotional consistency is inevitably missing. It is hard for a second actor to embody the human potential established by a first.

That matters, because humanity and potential are the play's subjects. They are what Peer has misused, distorted, squandered in his search for wealth, power and self-esteem. This was what Peer has inherited, and he is an onium with no centre or, worse, a dehumanized troll.

Maybe the production sacrifices depth for speed and visual effect, but those are no small compensations. A busy cast changes from drunk villagers to nobles to mad people trailing straitjackets, but is never better than as the phantoms of hoodlums, voyeurs and clattering dolls that peoples subterranean trolldom. Tails notwithstanding, they do what Ibsen wanted, represent you and me and everyman at our worst: quite a warning.

Homage to the baroque

CONCERTS

Paul Griffiths

Moscow Soloists
Barbican

Yuri Bashmet: imaginative points

so exciting, partly because the use of solo strings with a modern harpsichord back to the style of a quarter-century ago, partly because much of the detail seemed to tell in this hall, and partly because Bashmet's colleagues

chose not to follow his imaginative points of non-vibrato on the lead viola line.

But the concert ended marvelously with the Schmitke piece, his *Sonata for Violin, Strings and Harpsichord* (1968), which boasted bright-toned and immaculate playing from Oleg Kagan. The piece but the slow-fast-slow-fast pattern of a *sonata da chiesa*, both of the first sections being scherzos on nagging banalities, while the second slow movement is a passacaglia on glistening string chords, ending with the line in high harmonics (Kagan here was astonishing) against an accompaniment reduced to accordion-style wheezes.

Occasionally the work leaves its origin as a violin-piano sonata undisturbed, but the expansion clearly allowed Schmitke to uncover a homage to the baroque as clearly and inventively as the style of a quarter-century ago, partly because much of the detail seemed to tell in this hall, and partly because Bashmet's colleagues

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Rhapsodic triumph for prodigy

Barry Millington

Philharmonia/
Sinopoli
Royal Festival Hall

For all that Giuseppe Sinopoli has come to be regarded as something of a liability to the Philharmonia, he continues to draw capacity audiences. Or was it, perhaps, the staple diet of Dvorak's *Cello Concerto* and Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" Symphony that had the queue for returns at the Festival Hall winding round and out of the door? Or was it the prodigious Israeli conductor, Matt Haimovitz, still in his teens, and as much a product of media hype as Sinopoli himself?

I do not share the view, frequently canvassed, that Sinopoli is entirely devoid of musical sensitivity. But both his technique and his musicianship are all too often called into question. On a basic level, neither the first nor the second movement of the Dvorak started together, the wind choir of the latter producing what sounded

like a dodecaphonic squawk. Fortunately, Haimovitz is unquestionably a real musician, and his rhapsodic musings in response to the clarinet melody of the adagio were exquisitely done.

He does not have a grand, generous tone, such as Tortelier brings to bear in this concerto, nor a manner of cadences that militarily seizes the listener by the throat. On the contrary, his playing is intimately scaled, drawing the listener in. One moment in the first movement was particularly worthy. As he ducted briefly with

the solo violinist, Haimovitz chimed towards him to establish genuine rapport.

His technique is generally pure, though only his wit saved him in the treacherous upper reaches of his first terrace. Too much is expected of young artists such as this.

For evidence of true musicality in Sinopoli's "Pathétique" I listened in vain. Where was the emotional wasteland of the symphony's opening, the desperate pathos of the first or even the electrifying energy of the scherzo?

In each case, we were given a synthetic substitute, rather than conducting by numbers. Nobody wants over-inflated Tchaikovsky, but uniform blandness and empty gestures of artificiality attempt are not the solution either.