ARTS

Icy landscapes, intimate portraits

William Packer reviews exhibitions at the Barbican and Tate Galleries

To move through the exhibition, "Landscapes from a High Latitude," now on show in the Concourse Gallery at the Barbican (until April 8, then on to Brighton and Edinburgh: sponsors include KLM, Volkswagen and Manufacturers, Hanover), is to be quite as intrigued by its collective as by its particular qualities. Arranged jointly by The National Gallery of Iceland and the Brighton Polytechnic Gallery, it brings us the work of Icelandic artists in this century. And if, with unthinking condescension, as with Johnson's woman preacher, we should find ourselves at first surprised that such work should have been done at all, we soon discover that much of it has been done very well indeed.

Iceland is a most extraordinary place, with a landscape surely as particular and remarkable as any in the world. To drive from the airport across the lava field to Reykjavik, with the geysers spouting from the black rock, throwing up their plumes of steam against the dark mountains beyond, is almost to sense oneself on another planet, not alien exactly and most certainly neither unwelcoming nor intimidating, but decidedly strange. That it should have produced a distinctive school of artists is hardly to be wondered at, for how could the visual imagination not be stimulated by such a remotely beautiful, romantic place?

That said, however, we should not expect the world, for strangeness and isolation bring not only opportunities but also limitations. Direct contact with the outside world is naturally infrequent, exposure to fresh ideas and developments elsewhere necessarily tenuous. Who would reasonably expect a constant flow of masterworks from a population no larger than that of one of our smaller provincial cities? The virtues of concentration inevitably are modified by probability.

Yet the critical problem remains, that the more open to external influence Iceland has become in more recent times, and the closer Icelandic artists have thus moved towards the international mainstream, so the more sophisticated, predictable and dull the work has become. We find ourselves in the classically dubious position of welcoming, indeed yet regretting its effect, wishing upon a community of artists, in retrospect, an isolation we would never willingly have had imposed upon ourselves.

The stars of the show are undoubtedly of the founding and middle generations. Johannes Kharval (1885-1972) is probably the best known of them, and rightly so, for his landscapes are possessed of an epic simplicity and scale, and are worked with an equally epic expressionist vigour, quite in keeping with their subject. But Thorarinn Thorlaksson (1887-1950) and Asgrimur Jonsson (1876-1958) are no less historically important, and Jonsson in particular even finer, perhaps, in the immediate handling of his work and no less of strength in the statement. With interest growing in Nordic art of the modern period, their critical stock can only rise.

In truth the generations run together. Juliana Sveinsdottir (1889-1958) stands out by the monumental simplicity of her seascapes, and Finnur Jonsson (1892-1989) for his more openly symbolic expressionism. Of the middle generation, Gunnlaugur Scheving (1904-1972) is remarkable especially for the graphic vigour of his fishermen of the 1950s. Georg Haukssen (b.1961) continues in the tradition with a seascape of disarmingly simple aesthetic.

"Not the land, but an idea of a land," runs the title of an essay by Michael Tucker in the catalogue, quoting the poet, Johan Hjalmarsson. Indeed. Most of these Icelandic artists went abroad to study, usually to Copenhagen, and most of them returned. The sense immanent in all this work, early and late, is of a deep collective imagination haunted by Iceland's peculiar genius loci, the spirit of the place. Here is the most ancient of surviving democratic societies, and one innately poetic and imaginative, still speaking the pure language of the sagas, still fresh and lively in its feeling for its past. And it is in its landscape above all that this deep sense of continuity is rooted, its most sacred site the meeting place beside the lake at Thingvallir. In its art, we too may feel something of this imaginative force, if only a little

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At the Tate Gallery, in the new temporary exhibition galleries below the backstairs, a retrospective exhibition is given to the work of Thomas Lowinsky (until April 16), an artist who died in 1947, at the age of 55, and is all but forgotten today. He was born into comfortable circumstances, of Hungarian and German immigrant stock, and fortunate in never having to live by his work. It would be easy to write him off as a gentleman amateur, but he was rather more than that. He showed rarely, hence perhaps his comparative obscurity, but he worked steadily and seriously, with some particular success between the wars as an illustrator to some of the smaller presses.

His great influences were a curious and potent jumble of late, indeed decadent pre-Raphaelitism, romantic symbolism, classical myth, fairy tales and fin de siècle illustration. Through the early 1920s he was engrossed in a rather harshly expressed symbolism, technically meticulous yet curiously unsympathetic, highly detailed and occasionally unintentionally comical in its imagery. But the vision grew simpler and clearer, and by the late 1920s he was painting with the metaphysical intensity, especially in his small portrait studies, of the young Lucian Freud a generation later.

There follows in the 1930s a series of portraits of women, all professional models, that for all their modest scale and lack of any public ambition, are as finely observed, closely and delicately executed and psychologically convincing, as any of their time. These, and one or two late landscapes of similar accomplishment, are his masterpieces. Without pitching it too high, Lowinsky's is a reputation worth reviving.

"Skjaldbreidur," 1937, by Jon Stefansson at the Barbican

Portrait of Miss Serinka Negreanu, 1932, by Thomas Esmond Lowinsky at the Tate

A Midsummer Night's Dream

NEW YORK CITY BALLET, NEW YORK

"Won't it be to Mendelssohn?" said a woman the last time I saw a Regent's Park *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Mendelssohn's incidental music was once a staple of productions of this play, but no longer. Tyrone Guthrie's 1937 influential Victoriana staging was already fighting a rearguard action on Mendelssohn's behalf. Productions of the play for both Henley and City of London Festivals in 1986 employed the 1826 overture and 16 items, but, it seems, they started no trend.

But there are still two Mendelssohn *Midsummer* productions – in ballet, and they are by the art's two greatest postwar choreographers. Ashton's ballet, made in 1964 for the Shakespeare quatercentenary, has become regular fare with both branches of the Royal Ballet; New York City Ballet revives Balanchine's 1962 work towards the end of most February seasons. Both ballets have been danced by other companies. Balanchine's, however, has never been danced in England; my main reason in going to New York in February was to catch up with it.

A strange experience, growing to love one choreographer's use of play and music when you already love another's. These were, after all, the two most musical of choreographers. And, while Balanchine had known the Shakespeare in Russian from his youth, Ashton had choreographed for Michael Benthall's 1954 Old Vic staging of the play. *The Dream*, Ashton's one-acter, follows Guthrie and Benthall in using Victorian costume; what's more, it refers to the ballet of Mendelssohn's day. Balanchine's is American-Botticelli-Athenian. Ashton's is set to John Lanchbery's re-arrangement of the 1826 overture and 1842 incidental musical items; the Balanchine *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – in two acts – uses other Mendelssohn in addition to every scrap of the *Midsummer* music. Both choreographers give Oberon a brilliant dance highlight to the Scherzo, but it's unsettling to find Balanchine's Titania dancing to the Nocturne with Bottom when you're used to Ashton's climactic Oberon-Titania pas de deux to the same music.

Act One of Balanchine's is a marvel, and the insights it provides into both Shakespeare and Mendelssohn are thrilling. Its opening scenes afford some of his most dazzling contrasts. The fairy world is both more delicate and more huge than that of the mortals. When Titania is secreted with her attendants, Balanchine takes the liberty of giving her a nameless cavalier – not a paramour but a noble squire whose task, in partnering her, is simply to do her bidding and to help show off her infinite variety. Oberon, though without the silken glamour of Ashton's, is no less varied and unpredictable. With each entry in the Scherzo he deploys his energies and velocity in a wholly new way. In the dances of both consorts you see the gorgeous, alarming capriciousness of power.

Balanchine makes an astonishing array of great female roles. Whereas Ashton follows the common tendency of theatrical productions in making Hermia and Helena elegantly silly, Balanchine – like Britten in his 1960 opera – makes much of Helena's lonely anguish and the pathos of Hermia, the innocent victim of the fairies' interference. And then there's the glamour of Amazon Hippolyta, another monarch. She hasn't the sweep or diversity of Titania, but what force!

Another wonder throughout – so Mendelssohnian – is the quick dissolves from one scene into another. One moment Oberon quarrels with Titania; the next, the rude mechanicals start their rehearsals. This reaches a peak late in the act when through the mists Balanchine interleaves Hippolyta and her hunt, Puck, the child-fairies and the lost mortal lovers.

The first act, as with Balanchine's *Nutcracker*, had been all action, all drama. Act Two, as with *Nutcracker* too, is all dance. While the great lyric release of Ashton's *Dream* occurs in Titania's and Oberon's pas de deux, Balanchine's *Midsummer* opens into its fullest bloom in Theseus's court with a cool, impersonable things – a divertissement. This pas de quatorze, danced by people we've never seen before, ought to close with all dramatic logic, and yet its central pas de deux abstracts all the courtesy, love, chivalry that Act One had shown imperfilled.

Supported in adagio, an anonymous woman feels and uses her partner's support. She unfurls her line, travels and turns in dance phrases that are Mozartian or Bellinian in their firm, high flowing beauty. Watching this couple, we feel the courtships and reconciliations of Helena and Demetrius, Hermia and Lysander, Hippolyta and Theseus, Titania and Oberon. Strange that a pas de deux with no basis in Shakespeare's plot, and made to music that Mendelssohn did not design for the play, should so profoundly illumine this great *Midsummer* ballet.

Alastair Macaulay

The Nose

FRANKFURT CITY OPERA

Almost from the very beginning, Shostakovich seems to have been a master of the mask. We know this from different sources, but perhaps the best evidence of all is *The Nose*, which he wrote at the age of 22 and which has just been staged with considerable success in Frankfurt.

The opera's subject-matter – the nose which becomes detached from its owner, suddenly appears on a barber's breakfast table and later turns into a local government councillor – is open to all manner of interpretation, both political and psychological. But it is hard to decide whether the composer saw the Gogol tale as a riddle to poke fun at unsuspected targets, or a tragedy under the mask of farce. Shostakovich was to tread this ambiguous balancing act for the rest of his life.

If the authenticity of the "Memoirs" is accepted, the composer understood *The Nose* to be a horror story about police oppression, the cruelty of the crowd and the loss of personal identity. Recent German productions have laid a more overt political interpretation on the work. Johannes Schaaf's Frankfurt staging, however, treated it as a straightforward piece of burlesque, a harmless parody of human foibles, a mad dream from which the central character Kovalyov awakens in the final scene.

To a degree, this treatment worked: Peter Pabst's representational settings and billowing painted skyscapes allowed for a fast-moving sequence of decorative effects, and there were some striking realistic touches – including a stage-wide river-bridge teeming with bicycles – which gave the action an authentic 1930s Leningrad atmosphere.

Schaaf was strong on stage ensemble and individual characterisation, and above all on tragi-comic situation. Production baggage was limited to a few unexplained extras, including an Arab sheikh and flunkeys who made a mysterious appearance in the penultimate scene. All this was very entertaining. But the production lacked an essential quality of bite and sarcasm. It failed to probe much beneath the surface. Perhaps theatre and film directors like Schaaf find it hard to "interpret" operas which tie the music so closely to words and action: there are no arias for them to "produce."

On all other counts *The Nose* found the company in excellent health. The orchestral performance under Olaf Caetani was precise and confident; the players seeming to relish the communion-like changes in the personality of the music. Despite the parodying of other styles and the deliberate banalities, it was good to be reminded how avant-garde and inventive this score still sounds, particularly in Shostakovich's dazzling percussion palette.

The cast, singing in German, made easy contact with the audience and relished all the musical jokes. The two high tenor roles were sung by Dieter Bundschuh as the Inspector and William Cochran as the Commissioner, the latter rejoicing in a head-piece shaped like a nose. Alan Titus gave a big-hearted, virtuoso performance as Kovalyov.

The Nose was a particularly good choice of repertoire for the company's temporary home in the Schauspielhaus, which has a sharper acoustic and more intimate atmosphere than the opera house next door. The costs of reconstructing the opera house, which was practically destroyed in the November 1987 fire disaster, have now risen to over £60m, and the opening date has been put back to April 1991.

Alan Titus

Andrew Clark

Jackets II

BUSH THEATRE

Edward Bond belongs to that select little band of contemporary playwrights who are regarded by themselves and their disciples as prophets in their own land, scorned by the philistine masses, and venerated by the elect. In his double-bill, *Jackets*, he addresses himself to the issue of political martyrdom.

The first part is set in 18th century Japan, the second, called *Jackets II*, in a riot-torn contemporary Britain, located and dated only by the accents of his characters and the shoplifted clothes they pull out of a grey plastic bin bag in the opening scene. It is a tale of the cynical manipulation of anarchy in which two working-class lads, one (Ross Dunsmore) unemployed, the other (Tom Hudson) an army corporal, are brought face to face across the barrel of a gun by the realpolitik of their military masters.

A sacrifice must be made to marshal public opinion behind the imposition of a state of emergency. The fate of Corporal Brian Tebbam is sealed by his striking resemblance to his commanding officer.

Bond's writing is veined and muscled with a contempt and a humour that are very charismatic, until one begins to look beneath them for a coherent political infrastructure. Military tyranny is a bad thing.

Well yes, so the dramatists of Northern Ireland have been telling us for years. Urban unrest is manipulated by authority. We have heard that, too, many times in far more concrete, contextualised forms. The state is the enemy of the people. Brecht knew it well, just as he knew how to use the sort of politico-poetic commentary that is provided by Bond's predictable Welllian songs.

Viewed in those terms, this is self-indulgent stuff, which is in turn indulged by Nick Philippou's white hot production for Leicester Haymarket. It culminates in a prolonged scene of quite devastating black comedy as the lads' mothers, brilliantly played by Janette Legge and Maureen Morris, confront a wrongly-identified corpse with a shock that sends one into raving hysterics and the other into rabbit-eyed incomprehension.

In place of a manifesto, we are left with madness; in place of a conclusion, a counsel of despair.

Claire Armitstead

Gerhard Oppitz

WIGMORE HALL

The German pianist Gerhard Oppitz has been playing all of Brahms's piano music, in a series of four Wigmore recitals given at wide intervals (the last takes place at the end of this month). This is a substantial task for any performer – mastery of technique (and particularly of hand-stretch) is, indeed, the *sine qua non*, but no less important is the wide emotional range required to compass both the stormy virtuosity of the young Brahms's piano writing and the intimate, rather melancholy delicacies of those marvellous small pieces from his final period.

In the programme of the third recital Mr Oppitz neatly contrasted both kinds of Brahms – the two books of *Paganini Variations*, Op. 35, surrounded on either side by the Six Piano Pieces Op. 118 and the Seven Fantasies Op. 116. His touch, range, and sympathies are all of the right kind, as he here showed. A Rubinstein Competition winner of a decade or so ago, he is now a mature artist, with strong, definite ideas about music directly translated into powerful, full-mettled sound.

He doesn't linger, and he doesn't smooth down or perfume Brahms's chunky melodic phrases: the style is plain and forthright.

But this should not be taken to suggest that there was a lack of subtlety in the unfolding of Brahms's forms, whether large or small. Mr Oppitz's account of both books of variations was rich in carefully controlled physical excitement (the second slightly less finger-precise than the first); and his traversal of both sets of small pieces bespoke a sympathy for the complex emotional world they inhabit which rendered them far more passionate than usual.

"Autumnal" is the adjective normally enlisted for such occasions. Mr Oppitz is, in sum a Brahms pianist of the first rank.

Max Loppert

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NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

NOTICE is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the Shareholders of FIDELITY INTERNATIONAL FUND, a Société d'Investissement à Capital Variable organized under the laws of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg (the "Fund"), will be held at the principal office of the Fund, 5, boulevard de la Foire, Luxembourg, at 11:00 a.m. on March 15, 1990, specifically, but without limitation, for the following purposes:

1. Presentation of the Report of the Board of Directors.
2. Presentation of the Report of the Auditor.
3. Approval of the balance sheet and income statement for the fiscal year ended November 30, 1989.
4. Discharge of the Board of Directors and the Auditor.
5. Election of five (5) Directors, specifically the reelection of the following five present Directors: Messrs. Edward C. Johnson 3d, Charles A. Fraser, Jean Hamilton, John M.S. Patton, and H.F. van den Hoven, being all of the present Directors except William L. Byrnes who by reason of his retirement does not offer himself for reelection. The Fund notes with regret the recent death of its esteemed Director, Hisashi Kurokawa.
6. Election of the Auditor, specifically the election of Coopers & Lybrand, Luxembourg.
7. Declaration of a cash dividend in respect of the fiscal year ended November 30, 1989.
8. Consideration of such other business as may properly come before the meeting.

Approval of the above items of the agenda will require the affirmative vote of a majority of the shares present or represented at the Meeting with no minimum number of shares present or represented in order for a quorum to be present. Subject to the limitations imposed by the Articles of Incorporation of the Fund with regard to ownership of shares which constitute in the aggregate more than three (3) percent of the outstanding shares of the Fund, each share is entitled to one vote. A shareholder may act at any meeting by proxy.

Dated: February 20, 1990 By order of the Board of Directors

ARTS GUIDE

March 2-8

OPERA AND BALLET

London

Royal Opera, Covent Garden. The long-awaited new production of Strauss's *Elektra*, the first in London for four decades, is by Götz Friedrich, conducted by Georg Solti. Eva Marton leads a cast which also includes Marjana Lipovsek, Nadine Secunde, Robert Hale, and Robert Tear. There are final performances of *Don Pasquale*.

English National Opera, Coliseum. David Pountney's polemical *Troyens* production continues in repertory, with Helena Field in the title role, and Alan Opie and Edmund Barham as the Grecorts. Also the latest return of *The Mikado* in Jonathan Miller's celebrated "whitehotel" reworking.

Paris

Théâtre des Champs Elysées. Borodine's *Le Prince Igor* in a new production by Warsaw's Teatr Wielki (47863677).

Opéra Comique. Mozart's *Idomeneo* performed by the Orchestra d'Auvergne conducted by Jean-Jacques Kantorow (42830689).

Paris Opéra. Leningrad's Kirov Theatre under Oleg Vinogradov's direction presents a *Série Balanchine* with Helena Pankova as its star, followed by *Giselle* to Jean Corelli's and Jules Perrot's choreography at the Palais Garnier (47426671).

Amsterdam

The National Ballet with *Swan Lake* choreographed by Rudi van Dantzig and Toer van Schayk. (Tue, Wed). Danstheater. **Polish State Opera of Bydgoszcz** presents *La Traviata*. Circustheater (55 88 00).

Brussels

Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie. The Monnaie Opera in Mozart's *Il Seraglio* co-produced with the Wiener Festwochen/Vienna State Opera.

Cirque Royal. The Ballet de Monte Carlo in *The Lenses are Fading* choreographed by Anthony Tudor and *Galets Parisiens* choreographed by Leonide Massine (Thur).

Vienna

Staatsoper. *Andrea Chenier* by Giordano, *Werther* by Massenet, *Eugen Onegin* by Tchaikovsky. Ballet: *La Sylphide* by Lovenskjold, choreographed by Peter Schaufuss.

Volksoper. *Die Lustige Witwe, Der Bettelstudent, Das Lawal des Lächelns, Kiss me Kate, Tiefland*, Handel's *Ghazibo* and *La Bohème*.

Milan

Teatro Alla Scala. Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, energetically conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch, with a fine cast led by Nancy-Gustafson, Benn Heppner and Bernd Weikl (alternating with Manfred Schenk), and the Prague Philharmonic Choir. (80.91.26).

Rome

Teatro dell'Opera. Scheduled performance of Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* will not take place due to strikes (46.17.55).

Berlin

Opera. *Die Hochzeit des Figaro* in Götz Friedrich's production. Maria Zampieri repeats her much praised performance in the title role in *Das Mädchen aus dem goldenen Westen*. Also a co-production with the Lausanne ballet company with a premiere, choreographed by Maurice Béjart, danced to music by Wagner (*Autour du Ring*). Janacek's rarely played *Die Sache Makropulos* rounds off the programme.

Hamburg

Opera. The first successful Hamburg *Lady Macbeth* since Wieland's production, by Juri Ljubimow, has a strong cast led by Olivia Stapp, Jan Bilikiewicz, David Griffith and Hubert Hoche. *Tosca* is sung by Galina Savova in the title role, Luis Lima (Cavaradossi) and Juan Pons (Scarpia). *Die Hamletmaschine*, by Wolfgang Rihm returns. *Matthäus Passion* is choreographed by John Neumeier and danced to music by Bach.

Frankfurt

Opera. The successful *La Clemenza di Tito* production of the Lievi brothers returns with a first-rate cast led by Helena Doese, Alicia Nafe, Vincon Cole and Margit Neubauer. *Die Nase*, well produced by Johannes Schaaf. Further performances of *Iphigenie en Tauride*, conducted by Gary Bertini.

Cologne

Opera. *Salome*, excellently conducted by James Conlon, is sung by Stephanie Sundine, Andrea Andonian, Monte Pederson, Marta Szirmay and Guenter Neumann.

Bonn

Opera. Jean-Claude Riber's curious *Macbeth* production, superbly conducted by Gianfranco Masini. Also *Der Barbier von Sevilla*.

Munich

Opera. *Fidelio* features Sabine Hass, Aumeager Stimphius, Theo Adam, Spas Wenkoff and Martti Salminen. *Arabella* is sung by Lucia Popp, Julie Kaufmann, Cornelia Wulkopf, Alfred Kuhn and Gertrude Jahn. *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Der Freischütz* are also offered.

New York

Metropolitan Opera. Carlos Kleiber conducts the season's premiere of Franco Zeffirelli's production of *Otello* with Katia Ricciarelli as Desdemona, Placido Domingo as Otello and Barry McCauley as Cassio. Performances continue of James Levine conducting *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* in John Dexter's production. Gian Carlo Menotti's production of *Manon Lescaut* is conducted by Thomas Fulton. Lincoln Center Opera House (362 6000).

Washington

Washington Opera. Zack Brown's production of *Die Fledermaus*. *Aida* continues with Aprile Millo as Aida, Stefania Tacayska as Amneris and Vladimir Popov as Radames. (467 4600).

SALEROOM

US tax incentives return

Museums in the US have been able to build up wonderful collections in recent decades because of the tax advantages that donors received if they gave their art treasures to galleries and museums.

This incentive was removed in the Tax Reform Act of 1986 and has led to a dramatic fall in gifts. The Association of Art Museum Directors has reported that the value of art donations to the 116 institutions it represents declined by $161m, or 63 per cent, from 1986-1988.

An amendment is now before Congress which aims to remove such gifts from the Tax, thus increasing once again the value of the tax deduction for the donor. Oddly enough Christie's is urging Congress to accept the amendment. Christie's, along with Sotheby's, has gained from the rich selling their art at auction now that they get no tax breaks from gifting.

However its US president, Mr Christopher Burge, says "the art world must preserve a balance between commercial and cultural institutions and the 1986 tax change has adversely disturbed that delicate balance."

A French desk of around 1750 bearing the sought after makers stamp BVRB sold for £454,435 at Sotheby's in Monaco over the weekend. It was reputedly once owned by King Umberto of Italy. Among the Italian furniture on offer an early 17th century table with a pieta dura top depicting an italianate landscape more than doubled its forecast at £323,159. The mosaic top is attributed to the much admired Cosimo Castrucci who worked in Prague around 1600, often for the Emperor Rudolph II.

Antony Thorncroft