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First night

Thrilling result as Stalin is purged from Napoleonic saga

Opera Richard Morrison

War and Peace
Theatre Royal, Glasgow
★★★★☆

It was a British opera company — Sadler's Wells, in 1972 — that presented the first complete staging of Prokofiev's Tolstoy adaptation. Now a remarkable Scottish-Russian collaboration has led to the world premiere of this epic masterpiece in its original version. And it is startlingly different. Where is the ear-splitting

choral roar that usually opens the work? Or those tractor-thumping anthems to indomitable Russian peasants and their saintly leaders? Prokofiev apparently added them only after Stalin's censors bullied him into making the piece more "Soviet". When he composed his first version of Tolstoy's teeming Napoleonic saga — in 1941, just as Russia faced a new invader from the West — he placed more emphasis on the novel's central figures: the vivacious Natasha and the two friends who love her — Andrei, the world-weary war-hero, and Pierre,



Mankovsky: aptly loutish as Natasha's would-be seducer

the romantic dreamer. The original score is also much shorter: a mere three and a half hours!

Resuscitating and reconstructing it has taken the Scottish academic Rita McAllister 40 years. Three institutions have joined forces to bring it to the stage. Scottish Opera supplies technical support and half the orchestra; the rest, as well as most of the singers, are from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. But a significant number of the 670 named roles are taken by students from the Rachmaninov Conservatoire in Rostov-on-Don.

Getting that lot together must have been a logistic and linguistic nightmare, but the result is thrilling. Irina Brown's staging begins unpromisingly — with a 1941 Stalinist propaganda film. One fears that Tolstoy's whole yarn will be yanked incongruously into the mid-20th century. Not so. Muskets and gowns soon replace Soviet grey; and Chloe Lamford's sliding-panel set is transformed from Soviet lecture-hall to Tsarist ballroom and then to a battlefield overrun by charging soldiers and pitchfork-wielding lasses.

In this show Napoleon wins the singing prize, if not the war — a

superbly mature performance by a young Russian baritone, Aleksey Gusev. But the Natasha, Maria Kozlova, could also be a future star: her vibrant voice has the power to ride Prokofiev's most rumbustious orchestrations.

I liked Michel de Souza's gracefully sung Andrei, and Sergey Mankovsky was aptly loutish as the ghostly Anatole, Natasha's would-be seducer. Some other singers didn't quite cut the Slavonic mustard and the composite orchestra sometimes sounded stretched, but under Timothy Dean's direction the playing never lacked fervour.

And the piece? I missed those spine-shuddering choruses. But this original version is theatrically tighter, more lyrical — and a more practical proposition in these straitened times. Catch it in Edinburgh on Thursday or Saturday, or in Rostov in March. *Edinburgh Festival Theatre: 0131-529 6000*

Inside today

Could hockeysticks be less jolly than these?

First Night, times2, pages 12, 13