

## Going Out Reviews



Steve Gillitt

Divas: the Mahotella Queens have an energy that makes the Spice Girls look like Covent Garden's human statues

# Full-fat dance fever

AT full throttle the Mahotella Queens are an invigorating sight — three chunky South African matrons singing and dancing with an energy that makes the Spice Girls look like Covent Garden's human statues. Anorexia was never a problem for them, either. "The older you get the fatter you should be," advised their leader Hilda Tloubatla, who, with three daughters and three grandchildren, feels entitled to a little middle-aged spread.

Between songs in Zulu and Xhosa, the chatty Hilda confided that the trio had been together since 1964, "when I was 22 and the others were, Oh God, about 19". This prompted some light applause, but also the thought that a

MAHOTELLA QUEENS ★★

Pizza Express Jazz Club, Dean Street

Jack Massarik

group doesn't stay together all those years without forming a formidable bond.

We looked at these 50-something divas in a new light. It was clear how dynamic their theatre act must have been in their youth, as indeed it still was. Beneath the relaxation of their close-harmony delivery and the rumbustiousness of their amusing dance steps was a precision only hard work can create.

Behind them a close-knit young quartet, with guitarist Victor Mkhize and drummer Theko Masithyane prominent, pushed things along in the rollicking two-beat rhythm that is South African all through. The Queens had recently lost three longtime musicians, two to illness and one in a car crash, yet even here Hilda managed to look on the bright side. "We miss them, but at least with these young guys," she cried, "we're the bosses now!"

Today they're off for continental Europe, but not without leaving their Indigo album *Sebai Bai* in world-music racks. This enjoyable hour will remind their fans that it's not over until the lusty ladies (in traditional dress, complete with outsize flat-topped hats and a full costume change every set) sing.

# Freudian slip-up

"UNFORTUNATELY we didn't see eye to eye on the foreskin nailing business" is a gem of a one-liner, but it stands out for all the wrong reasons in Nigel Charnock's latest offering. *Asylum* poses as a shockingly comic investigation into the labyrinthine world of therapy, but while the play might aim to whirl the audience down a Joycean stream of consciousness, from the auditorium it feels like a bad case of imaginative diarrhoea.

As a co-founder of the infamous dance company DV8, Charnock acquired a reputation as the bad boy of British dance. His subsequent forays into physical theatre have stirred up profoundly mixed reactions: a 1999 production of *Macbeth*, which linked the *Macbeths* with Frederick and Rosemary West, attracted both praise and derision, while *Human Being* was criticised for the tedious depiction of his relationship with his parents.

*Asylum* continues a core theme in Charnock's work — his fascination with the connection between therapy and entertainment. Five emotionally damaged travellers — three men and two women — find themselves in a

ASYLUM X

Queen Elizabeth Hall

Rachel Halliburton

large house, where they commence the lengthy, erratic, and ultimately screamingly boring process of delving into each other's problems.

Charnock has sculpted this disaster with some effort and occasional style. The dialogue, in direct tribute to the play's Freudian inspiration, flows rapidly through sequences of free association, ranging from the elaborately obscene, "Socrates not suck on these, Confucius not cunnilingus", to the basic banter of, "The world is a circle." "So's my arse." "The bottom line."

The problem is that just as you are trying to work out whether this could be a few steps away from genius, rather than pretentious vacuousness, Charnock burns his directionless boats. He intersperses the action with songs that could have come straight out of the Eurovision contest, with their oh-so-synthetic harmonies, and me-and-my-microphone delivery.

That much overused term, irony, may be brought for the defence here, but ultimately the play is a mess. Even the movement does not save it; Liam



Dumbstruck: Liam Steel, Martin Marquez and Linda Dobell play emotionally damaged travellers

Steel, one of the dancers, has shown far better how modern dance and theatre can combine in his work with *Frantic Assembly*.

Charnock should focus on his strengths. Dance's loss is not theatre's gain.

●Ends tonight. Box office: 020 7960 4242.

# No thanks for the memories

THE FUTURE FROM MEMORY/EMMA KAY ★

Chisenhale Gallery

Nick Hackworth

IF, AS someone once observed, "Life without memory is no life at all", then someone ought to check Emma Kay for vital signs as a matter of urgency. Her current oeuvre consists entirely of work that deliberately exposes the leakiness of her memory. Kay's now standard *modus operandi* is to take a canonical body of knowledge and reconstruct it entirely from her own memory with predictably faulty results. So far she has produced: *The Bible* from Memory, a 7,000-word long piece of wall-text; *Shakespeare* from Memory, 26 garbled, inkjet-printed synopses hung in white frames; *The World* from Memory I — III, a series of inaccurate world maps and *Worldview*, an 80,000 word "description" of the history of the world in book format. The pieces bash us over the head, none too subtly, with the basic observation of how imperfect and subjective our individual reservoirs of knowledge really are.

The latest addition to this litany of mnemonically challenged work is *The Future* from Memory, which attempts to describe the future of the world. The piece takes the form of a long, narrative loop of digitally animated text projected onto a wall. The sentences appear at the bottom of the projected screen. Initially they loom large but become smaller and smaller as the text recedes jerkily and gracefully into some minis-

cule point of infinity. The work ends up looking like a low-budget version of the start of *Star Wars* — "In a galaxy far, far away ..." but sadly without the saving grace of a bombastic sound track.

Unfortunately the content is no better than the presentation. The future that Kay predicts is far too plausible to be of particular interest. In 2139, Kay predicts, a massive flood will devastate the world. By 2169 "ancient" celluloid media will have disintegrated. Virtual interaction will replace physical interaction. Media conglomerates will market commodified cultural experiences. And so the mundane predictions roll on, leaving one with little intellectual or aesthetic stimulation.

But perhaps the work does serve a purpose. Kay has clearly found her niche — the exploration of the fragmentary and subjective nature of knowledge — and seems intent on preserving the topic for herself through the simple but effective strategy of flogging it to death.

●Until 1 April. Chisenhale Gallery, 64 Chisenhale Road, London, E3 (020 8981 4518).

# Homage to Soviet precision

ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA ★★

Barbican

Rick Jones

ANY disappointment that Daniele Gatti, music director of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, was too ill to conduct his British employers last night, receded with Mozart's *Linz Symphony*, evaporated with Prokofiev's *Second Piano Concerto* and turned to joy with Mussorgsky's *Pictures* at an Exhibition.

The Russian replacement, Yuri Simonov, displayed a gallery of gestures in his colourful interpretation of the programme. Was that a duck he mimed to give the bassoonist her lead in the last movement of the Mozart? For an instant her reedy tone was a plaintive mating call in the Austrian wilderness. The Russian pianist Mikhail Rudy took the stage as if in response. He inadvertently struck a note as he acquainted himself with the keyboard, apologised endearingly to the audience and played Prokofiev's *Op16* with weighty eloquence. The iron fist of the first movement might have been Rachmaninov's if he had stayed at home. The breathless scherzo flew along its strict semiquavers as if demonstrating Soviet precision engineering. The hefty intermezzo pounded like a steel foundry and the finale danced like a workers' holiday.

The applause was enough to delay the interval with an encore. Rudy played a Prokofiev *Prelude* (No7 from the *Op12* set) with breezy nonchalance and made us all jealous.

Ravel's orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures* at an Exhibition was an act of homage that Simonov matched in his fresh conducting. He pushed the speeds along: it was a quick visit. The soloists shone for him. The saxophone projected with uncanny resonance in *The Old Castle*, the muted trumpet bitterly bit at his monotone in *Goldenberg* and Schuyke and the tuba sang with merry insouciance and warm, round tone in *Bydlo*. Nothing has been said about the conductor for Friday's concert but only Mrs Gatti should worry if Simonov again benefits from the current epidemic.

●The RPO series continues with Mozart's *Prague Symphony*, Prokofiev *Piano Concerto No3* with soloist Jean-Philippe Colard and Elgar's *Enigma Variations* on Friday at the Barbican (020 7638 8891).

Ratings: ○ adequate, ★ good, ★★ very good, ★★★ outstanding, X poor