



Marc Antolin (Marc Chagall) and Audrey Brisson (Bella) in *Flying Lovers of Vitebsk*. Below left: Daniel Jamieson. Right: Emma Rice

Off the wall

A new production reveals the intimate – and often difficult – relationship between the artist Marc Chagall and his wife Bella. **Judi Herman** speaks to the creators of the show, *The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk*, about the inspiration behind it

“It feels like the echo of Chagall is there constantly,” says playwright Daniel Jamieson. “The physical language of the piece is very intimate, beautiful, acrobatic.” He is talking about *The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk*, the new production by Kneehigh Theatre company, which promises to be a magical and surreal stage journey following the artist Marc Chagall and his wife Bella through the years of their love as they negotiate the world-changing events of the first half of the 20th century. Jamieson is fresh from sitting in on two weeks of rehearsals with director Emma

Rice, Audrey Brisson, the acrobat and soprano from Cirque du Soleil, who plays Bella, and Marc Antolin, the Welsh actor who plays Marc.

“We’ve brought a physical language [to the piece] which has the energy and freedom of Chagall’s painting, but also the intimacy of the two performers,” says director Rice, who is working on her last production with Kneehigh, the internationally acclaimed, Cornwall-based company, before moving to take on the mantle of artistic director at Shakespeare’s Globe.

Jamieson and Rice are reviving and revising a play Jamieson first wrote for Exeter-based Alibi Theatre in the early 1990s that was inspired by Marc Chagall’s paintings as well as autobiographical writings of the artist and his wife. The

original play was directed by Nikki Sved, and Jamieson and Rice, who were partners at the time, starred as Marc and Bella.

The play was also inspired by workshops in Poland with the extreme physical theatre company Gardzienice, which Sved, Jamieson and Rice attended in 1990. Jamieson describes the experience as “Chagallian, [involving] running up the wall and doing somersaults, and a vivid mixture of song, movement and text. It also involved an expedition to tiny villages in the woods in what is now Belarus. It was essentially the world of Chagall paintings, with its wooden buildings – but with the important omission of the Jews, which struck all of us”.

Reading the play, this rich double-biographical story flies off the page like the figures in Chagall’s paintings. But Jamieson brings out an egocentric single-mindedness in Chagall: he has the artist work to his own agenda, leaving Bella (née Rosenfeld) in Vitebsk soon after they fall in love, to develop his art in Paris from 1910 to 1914. Chagall returns with a to-do list that includes marrying Bella after a proposal by post. And the play shows Bella’s justifiable reproach at Chagall missing the birth of their daughter, Ida, by five days.

“But the connection between them remains very strong,” says Rice. “Their relationship is tremendously romantic and they both wrote about it and he painted it. I feel it’s a truth that they loved each other from the minute they met, and this was not an easy marriage. She was very bright and clever, from an important family and chose to marry this very poor painter who then messed her about for years!”

“What shines through is Bella’s own brilliant mind and artistic ability as a writer,” adds Jamieson. “She was one of the four most gifted students in Russia.”

“Speaking from an older woman’s perspective,” Rice continues, “it’s interesting to see how hard it must have been to be married to someone so special. I hate to use the word genius but I think he was and she was too, but she wasn’t creating work that would change the world in the way he did. As a younger woman I wanted to make them equal [in the original production], and as an older woman I think the

interest is in the fact that whatever he had was bubbling up away from her. We watch her negotiate that as a woman and an artist. How do you get out of somebody’s shadow without leaving them?”

Jackie Wullshlager’s authoritative 2008 biography of Chagall has informed the rewrites and in a powerful new scene set in post-revolutionary Moscow circa 1920, Bella inspires the artist to paint huge backdrops for the newly formed State Jewish Chamber Theatre. This new section mirrors an earlier part of the play where Chagall paints Bella for the first time and we see him manipulate her “lightly, magically and sexily”, according to Rice. “She turns that on him later when she inspires him to paint again for the Chamber Theatre. It’s a lovely balance watching the power dynamics between these two.”

In this rewrite, Jamieson uses a Yiddish poem by Polish-born writer Rachel Korn (who was born in 1898 and died in 1982). “She wrote very intimate and physical love poems. Ian Ross, the theatre’s musical director, has set it beautifully to music,” says Rice. “Chagall

was so inspired by the teachings, magic, and mysticism in Hassidic culture. We can see that freely expressed in the paintings and I want the piece to also do that.”

The piece blends new music from Ross with original Yiddish and Russian folk tunes, as well as Tchaikovsky’s Piano Trio. Chagall was designing the costumes and other visual elements for a ballet set to this



“Chagall’s to-do list includes marrying Bella after a proposal by post”

music by Tchaikovsky when Bella died in 1944 in New York from a viral infection.

“Just before they left Russia the Bolsheviks and Communists were already destroying Jewish life there, so there was a sense they had to hold on to it,” says Jamieson.

A feature of the script is the Chagalls in exile and the play explores how much the iconography of Chagall’s paintings and the paintings themselves became their luggage. “We talk about the objects in his paintings – the cow, the fish, the candles, literally being their luggage that they have to carry through the show. An integral feature of the design is that these objects are going to appear in quite a cunning and magical way,” says Jamieson.

Rice agrees: “They carry not just baggage. It is treasures that they carry across the planet. That’s something so resonant, especially in these times when people are forced to move their homes across the world. What do you save and how do you save it, in your bag or in your hearts or mind? Or do you write or paint it? It’s a brilliant metaphor about home and roots and belief.”

“Chagall spent a lot of time looking back to an early time of his life in his paintings and that’s the shape of our own story: this show is something we originally made in our 20s and we’re returning to it in our late 40s,” says Jamieson. “The arc of life we examined in a youthful and imaginative way we’ve now come to understand. It’s given the show an added force and poignancy.” ■

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The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk is at Bristol Old Vic from Friday 27 May to Saturday 11 June. www.kneehigh.co.uk, www.bristololdvic.org.uk; at Shakespeare’s Globe from Thursday 16 June to Saturday 2 July. www.shakespearesglobe.com. For more dates see What’s Happening, p35.



Chagall in the UK

This country isn’t over-endowed with original artworks by Marc Chagall. But **Monica Bohm-Duchen** uncovers a few places where you can see the work of this remarkable artist

TATE BRITAIN

This is the only public collection to include Chagall in its holdings. The museum owns seven (rarely exhibited) works, and none of them major ones, although *The Poet Reclining* of 1915 numbers among his most romantic. The two circus images relate to a little-known 1950 mural project to decorate the auditorium of the now defunct Watergate Theatre in London.

www.tate.org.uk

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Visitors to the cathedral, in West Sussex, can enjoy a magnificent stained glass window on the theme of Psalm 150 (“...let everything that hath breath praise the Lord”) designed by Chagall in 1978, towards the end of his long and colourful life.

www.chichestercathedral.org.uk

ALL SAINTS’ CHURCH

Tudeley, Kent

All Saints’ Church guards a well-kept secret: it is the only church in the world to have windows designed entirely by Chagall. From the outside, the building looks like dozens of other unassuming English parish churches; inside, the intense blues and occasional yellows of the windows come as a complete revelation. Originally commissioned in the early 1960s by Sir Henry and Lady Rosemary d’Avigdor Goldsmid (only the former was Jewish) in memory of their daughter Sarah who died in a boating accident, aged 21, the ensemble is dominated by the East Window, in which the figure of the crucified Jesus presides over a watery scene below, depicting mourners and a drowning girl. Chagall had long been preoccupied with Jesus, originally – in the 1930s and 40s – seeing him as the original Jewish martyr, and later as a symbol of universal brotherhood. Unsurprisingly, some people (Jews and Christians alike) find this Jewish artist’s obsession with the founding figure of Christianity deeply problematic.

www.tudeley.org

PRINTS

For those interested in purchasing a Chagall print, there are two UK galleries who specialise in his graphic work: Goldmark Gallery in Uppingham and Rutland, and Sylvester Fine Art in London’s Belsize Park.

www.goldmarkart.com; www.sylvesterfineart.co.uk