



Grim but rewarding journey through Stalinist moral minefield

THEATRE

Life and Fate
Maly Drama Theatre. His Majesty's Theatre, Perth, February 17.

OPENING night patrons seemed to emerge from *Life and Fate*, the centrepiece of the Perth International Arts Festival's theatre program, in one of two mindsets: feeling unaccountably unmoved by the drama, or mute with admiration.

Both camps would agree that Maly Drama Theatre's 3½ hour play is a meaty work performed with seamless stagecraft, an almost religious concentration by the large Russian-speaking cast, and a driving sense of purpose that lasted all the way to the final curtain call.

For those of us who relished the spectacle, it pulsed with the unbearable anxiety felt by those who lived through the 20th century's cruellest epoch.

The play's central character, Jewish physicist Viktor Shtrum (Sergey Kuryshev), must tread a path through the moral minefield of Stalinist Russia, where loyalty to the party — and securing the survival of one's wife and child —

demands the betrayal of others, the filling of gulags and contempt towards Jews.

Director Lev Dodin (who appeared with his actors on opening night) adapted Vasily Grossman's epic World War II novel into a play with a wide sweep of history, 27 characters and wordy meditations (subtitled in English) on life and fate, as one might expect from one of the world's great directors of Russian classics.

Dodin demands concentration, but rewards with perfect clarity around a central theme: if even one ghetto exists, all who live in the world are in a ghetto.

On stage, the incongruous but brilliant dramatic device of infiltrating death-camp inmates into the Shtrum household — huddling on the bed or lining up before the kitchen dresser for food — illustrated that essential connectedness.

The chaotic staging has an apocalyptic feel; through its debris steps a tiny woman (Tatiana Shestakova), Shtrum's mother and a Holocaust victim, whose harrowing narrative throughout the play acts as her son's conscience.

There are many superbly contrived touches, such as the repeated strains of Schubert's *Serenade* sung by inmates of both fascist and socialist prisons.

Totalitarian regimes differ little in the fear they inspire, and we witness paranoia in all its disguises: whispered confessions in the shower, cathartic love-making, and the telltale tics of a fidgeting physicist, who obsessively moves his pen from inside his coat pocket, to lapel, and back again, unable to stop.

Life and Fate is almost unrelentingly bleak except, ironically, in its exposition of human failings.

A doomed Shtrum, pricked by his mother's memory to resist the regime, suddenly receives a terrifying telephone call from Stalin himself, and the words: "I wish you success in your work." Shtrum's crazed relief is palpable and utterly understandable, even though his capitulation causes everyone around him to avert their eyes.

Writer Grossman drew deeply on his own remarkable life to create his central character; the KGB even confiscated the typewriter ribbons he used to write his critical novel, and it was smuggled out to the west and published in 1980.

Grim it may be, but *Life and Fate* deserves a huge audience.

VICTORIA LAURIE

Tickets: \$59.50. Bookings: 1800 193 300. Until February 23.



Director Lev Dodin has adapted Vasily Grossman's novel into a play with a wide sweep of history