



Acclaimed director: Lev Dodin on the set of *Life and Fate* at His Majesty's Theatre.

Picture: Toni Wilkinson

Heavy and heaving with a hint of a laugh

STEPHEN BEVIS
ARTS EDITOR

Lev Dodin, one of the world's most acclaimed theatre directors, is known for his heavy, heaving Russian epic plays.

Life and Fate, a sprawling 3½-hour production at His Majesty's Theatre, is about a Jewish nuclear physicist and his family, the siege of Stalingrad and the Soviet gulags and nazi death camps of World War II.

It is intense stuff, Dodin admitted, so it is just as well there is the odd joke, even if they are told in Russian.

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"When we took our actors on a research trip to Auschwitz, we met a former prisoner, a Polish artist who said he had never laughed so much as during those three years because of the practical jokes and anything to lighten the mood when all your feelings are heightened," he said.

Life and Fate was concerned not

so much with events of 70 years ago as about the dangers of nationalism and extremism today, Dodin said.

The Maly Drama Theatre of St. Petersburg has grown into a powerhouse under Dodin, renowned for taking years to develop each play.

"There is a constant danger of becoming stale so we have to be ever-vigilant," he said.

"This production is very much alive or we would never have dragged it all the way to Perth."

Life and Fate ends on Tuesday.

> REVIEW

TODAY LIFT

Hope lives in saga of death

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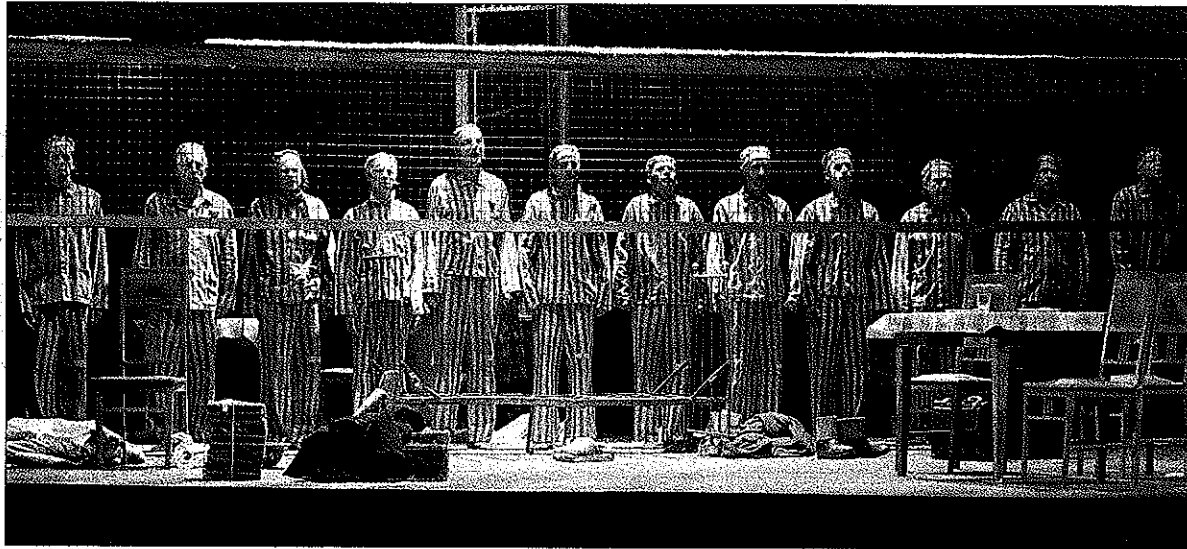
Life and Fate
Adapted by Lev Dodin
Maly Drama Theatre
His Majesty's Theatre
Review: Ali Taulbut

Life and Fate is the partly autobiographical tour de force 1960 novel of Vasily Grossman. It is a sweeping epic of a literary work banned by the Soviet State and not published there until 1988.

Russia's Maly Drama Theatre provides a theatrical adaptation with matching ambition and proportions.

Historically, the backdrop is World War II during the German invasion of the Soviet Union with special focus on the Battle of Stalingrad.

Jumping about in time and location between the battlefield, a Moscow apartment and behind the wires of a Nazi concentration camp and Soviet gulag, the action is framed by a final letter of farewell from doomed Jewish woman Anna Shtrum to her son. OK, it's a shameless technique of emotional manipulation, but it's no less powerful and moving for that.



Confronting: Death-camp depictions and intimate family scenes sit cheek-by-jowl in *Life and Fate*.

Picture: Ben Crabtree

Eminent physicist Viktor Shtrum and his family return to their Moscow home after the evacuation from Stalingrad. Shtrum is eager to pursue his atomic research in the wake of Einstein's "subversive" theories. Many of his family and friends are already serving sentences in Stalin's labour camps and Shtrum faces expulsion and possible arrest for his refusal to repent his scientific ideals.

Given a reprieve by Stalin himself, Shtrum twinkles with boyish relief at being told by the dictator, "I wish you success in your work", but his

complacency is short-lived when his ideals are tested and he faces a moral dilemma.

The narrative is chock-full of recurring philosophical discourse on the nature of humanity and goodness, the interconnected nature of fascism and communism, Jewish identity, the futility of war and the freedom of the individual.

The adaptation is by Russian theatre legend Lev Dodin, who also directs. At three-and-a-half hours, in Russian with surtitles, it's quite an endurance test. The interconnectedness of the characters'

lives and fates is illustrated with fluid staging on a clever and evocative set by Alexey Poray-Koshits.

Intimate family scenes sit cheek-by-jowl with the pallor and despair of a Soviet labour camp and a Nazi concentration camp by turns. Bisecting the stage diagonally is a wire fence, behind which the prisoners stare hollow-eyed, debate political ideology and lament their fate.

Stark, cool and precise lighting from Gleb Filshinskiy drains the colour from the dusty monochrome

interior of the Shtrum home.

In an Australian theatre climate where financial restrictions dictate scaled-down productions and short rehearsal time, it is thrilling to experience the craftsmanship of a performance five years in the making.

Maly, a repertory company, works together over many years with many productions recycling continuously. This is evident through each actor's performance.

Such passion and selfless dedication to the ensemble produces performances of rare intensity that give some nobility back to a profession tainted through its worship of mediocre, flash-in-the-pan celebrity.

At its conclusion, many of the absolutes that the characters have accepted in their fervour of devotion to "the cause" are unravelling. A deeper truth is dawning about the mirror image of totalitarian regimes.

We witness the futile and unjust deaths of several characters and are aware of millions more who have and will perish in the name of the respective "good" that Hitler or Stalin believe in. And yet, as Shtrum's Jewish mother observes from her doomed ghetto, the spirit of hope lives on and the human desire to be kind and free prevails.

Life and Fate runs until Tuesday.

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