

Black Snow offers the theatre as a devastating metaphor for larger madness beyond, reports **Michael Billington**

## Lunacy in stages

**T**HERE are no politics like backstage politics; and Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *Black Snow*, written in 1936-37 but only published in 1985, is famous for its biliously funny portrait of Stanislavski as a blinkered autocrat. Out of this Keith Dewhurst has now fashioned a highly entertaining play at the Cottesloe whose only fault is its excessive fidelity to its source.

Its hero, Maksudov, is a shyly obstinate writer who is overcome with a kind of giddy delirium when he has a play accepted by Moscow's Independent Theatre (a thinly veiled version of the Moscow Art Theatre). He then finds himself manacled by an iron contract, drawn into a world of clashing egos and subject to the whims of the theatre's joint chief, Ivan Vassilevich (ie Stanislavski).

Not only does this bow-tied old tyrant demand massive rewrites: when he comes to the theatre, he takes six weeks to rehearse a single scene and ruins spontaneously good performances by the inflexible application of his famous Method. Unsurprisingly, Maksudov is driven to despairing suicide.

Bulgakov's novel, set in 1925 when his play *The White Guard* was undergo-

ing its travails, reminds me of another work written that year: Kafka's *The Trial*. There is exactly the same feeling of the impotent individual battling against a serpentine bureaucracy. But, on stage, the hilarious scenes with Vassilevich inevitably take over. Robin Bailey plays the old monster brilliantly as a silky despot peering at life through gold-rimmed lorgnettes and emitting quiet groans at authorial intransigence.

I have also seen nothing funnier this year than the scene where Vassilevich gets a hapless actor (Paul Morfarty) to demonstrate romantic passion by careering round the stage on a bicycle while giving his lover lecherous ocellades.

I have, however, two reservations. The play panders, unwittingly, to an English philistinism that believes all acting systems are rubbish: the audience actually cheers when Maksudov tells someone "You can't act - if you could act you wouldn't need a method."

The truth is, of course, that Stanislavski's system was based on sound technique and that Bulgakov's portrait of him is vindictively unfair: they may have quarrelled over Bulgakov's *Moliere* but the old man actually threat-

ened to resign when the Moscow Art Theatre's Repertory Committee blocked *The White Guard*. By sticking rigidly to the structure of the novel, Mr Dewhurst also allows the play to peter out in anti-climax since we never know whether Maksudov's work reached the stage: a bit of imaginative rewriting is called for here.

But William Gaskill's fleet production is well worth seeing for its portrait of backstage bitchery and institutional politics. Annie Smart also designs it intelligently so that we are reminded all evening of the overpowering presence of the Art Theatre's circular prose arch.

Pitted against the suavely domineering Mr Bailey, Ron Cook's Maksudov has exactly the right look of a hunted, haunted stoat. And there is first-rate support from Gillian Barge as the fiercely protective secretary to Vassilevich's unseen rival (Nemirovich-Danchenko) and from Elizabeth Bradley as the old man's aunt who greets Maksudov's announcement that he has written a play with the unanswerable line "But why? Aren't there enough already?" *Black Snow* may not be fair; but it offers a devastating portrait of the theatre as a metaphor for the larger lunacy beyond.



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## Billington on Black Snow

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