

THE Royal National Theatre continues its astonishing run of success with a new triumph in the Cottesloe: William Gaskill's beautifully directed and perfectly acted production of *Black Snow*, a play by Keith Dewhurst faithfully moulded from Mikhail Bulgakov's 1936 theatrical novel about his ambivalent addiction to the Moscow Art Theatre.

Dewhurst has paid tribute to Gaskill as 'our most distinguished exponent of Stanislavskian ideas'. But while Gaskill uses methods of improvisation and character research in his work, he is not a slave of the Method. The censorious and mellow tone of his production derives surely from his suspension of all technical theories.

Black Snow celebrates, critically but affectionately, the shallow compromises and accidental progress of a life in the theatre. Bulgakov was recapping his painful experience of in-house censorship during the brief presentation of his allegorical anti-Stalinist satire, *Molière*. His novel, and Dewhurst's play, charts the journey of the tortured Bulgakov figure, Maksudov (Ron Cook), from lonely despair to theatrical flowering, and prompt disillusionment.

The central scene, a rehearsal, is presided over by

Hilarity at a critical s

Theatre ■ Michael Coveney

RNT's *Black Snow*, RSC's *Twelfth Night* and *The Government Inspector* at Greenwich.

Ivan Vassilevich (Bulgakov's lacerating portrait of Stanislavski), wrapped in a blanket and attended by sycophants. It is a gloriously funny demonstration of how a new play can become prey to a director's vanity.

A thespian wooer (Paul Moriarty) is given a bike and instructed to ride it 'for love' around his bug-eyed beloved

(Marion Bailey). I do not expect to see anything more deliciously hilarious all year than Mr Moriarty arranging his facial muscles into expressions of sensual devotion while encircling Miss Bailey at top speed.

The autocratic Vassilevich, played with a mixture of granite indifference, plummy incantation and bumbling condescension by the superbly dignified Robin Bailey, merely clears his throat and says it is all wrong.

The play ends as oddly, and as suddenly, as the book, but the adaptation — cunningly and fluently designed in the near-round by Annie Smart — catches Bulgakov's mood of frustration, ephemeral vision and stage-struck obsessiveness.

The theatrical gallery includes lovely vignettes from Philip McGough as a slimy business manager, Dinah Stabb as a hysterical actress, Elizabeth Bradley as a nodding old relic and, especially, the inimitable and criminally underrated Gillian Barge as a linchpin secretary through whom the entire life of the organisation flows as she types out the new script and imperiously fends off requests for free tickets. My joy in such acting is unconfined; and so, I trust, will be yours.

"A remarkable directorial debut by Simon Callow – the film achieves a dynamic visual style. Vanessa Redgrave is nothing less than astounding." – David Robinson, THE TIMES

"Miss Redgrave was, is and will always remain one of the greatest actresses ... she continues to barrel forward with the momentum of a transcontinental express train that will not be stopped. The spectacle takes the breath away. THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFE is that kind of movie."

– Vincent Canby, THE NEW YORK TIMES

"★★★★ A provocative sexual armageddon."

– Bruce Williamson, NEW WOMAN

"Fascinating." – Steve Grant, TIME OUT



Coveney on Black Snow

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