

Collaborators

Writer: John Hodge

Director: Nicolas Hytner
(National Theatre, London)

A COMEDY about Stalin? It sounds outrageous, and in fact it is. Dark, bitter, savage and very clever, *Collaborators* is a new play by John Hodge about the Russian playwright Mikhail Bulgakov, who was given a poisoned chalice by the regime when asked to write a play celebrating the life of Stalin. The time was 1938. Stalin was turning 60. And suddenly the writer who was acclaimed for his subversive play *The White Guard* began spouting propaganda. Hodge's play imagines how this could have happened.

In fact, it could have been any time, anywhere, because this is a brilliant dissection of the power of fear. It asks questions about who pulls the strings, about how creative artists can remain aloof from the regime and how a dictator deals with dissent. And it looks unflinchingly at the allure of making your voice heard.

Stalin is drawn larger than life, bursting on stage in Bulgakov's nightmare – a cartoon-like figure that battles with him and gives him sleepless nights. The reality is so much more benign, that we laugh with relief.

Bulgakov is a man riddled with anxiety, but rigid in his principles, an artist who stands as a beacon of hope for other writers. After three years of rehearsal, his play about Molière has finally had its first night, only to be closed the next day by the security police, in the form of Vladimir and his emaciated, silent, side-kick, Stepan. Broad and jovial, Vladimir offers Bulgakov the chance of having his play on stage again if he concedes.

Numbed with writer's block, help comes from an unlikely source, and soon Stalin is actually writing the play for him. Meeting underground in a secret hideout, the two become collaborators.



Alex Jennings, left, as Bulgakov and Simon Russell Beale as Stalin in 'Collaborators'.

Giddy dance into the ABYSS

Outrageous comic dissection of the power of fear, writes *Nushin Elahi*

Stalin grabs the typewriter, and pushes his pile of files towards the other man. He writes, while Bulgakov is faced with the conundrums of ruling. And with every paper he signs, he steps deeper into

the quagmire. As the hot water in his apartment is turned on, and coffee appears on his table, there are others who are disappearing.

A trio of Britain's best actors makes this an unmissable treat.

Simon Russell Beale is wildly funny as Stalin, a man with an enormous personality. He is so friendly, so relaxed, so very human, that one begins to think the monster is a myth. The audience is taken on the same journey as Bulgakov, played by a nervous Alex Jennings. Initially suspicious, haggard but firm in his beliefs, he is slowly won over by the sheer reasonableness of the tyrant. The accord the two actors achieve is the pivotal hinge of the play. Mark Addy offers a foil as the secret policeman with a heart, but he is quicker to show the iron fist inside, reminding us constantly of how surreal this "collaboration" is.

Bulgakov's slow dawning of what is actually happening is mirrored in those around him – individuals blasted into orbit by the sheer force of Stalin's power.

The strong cast, especially Jacqueline Defferary as the bewildered wife, William Postlethwaite as the idealistic young writer and Pierce Reid as the happy lodger, all

give beautifully nuanced performances. Director Nicholas Hytner draws us into this giddy maelstrom of the abyss of terror with a touch so light that we laugh even as we gasp in horror. He envelops us in a gossamer-thin web of delight that pulls tighter until it suffocates.

John Hodge is a screenwriter who has made his name with films such as *Trainspotting* and *Shallow Grave*, both directed by Danny Boyle.

This is a very visual production, despite its historical antecedents and the depth of its content. Images such as the parallels Hodge draws with Bulgakov and Molière both incurring the wrath of the ruler are powerfully evocative.

It's not an easy play to film though, as it is played in the round in the National's smallest theatre, the Cottesloe. As part of the stage audience you are so engrossed in the action that your fellow audience members don't really register, and hopefully the film directors allow one to remain equally focused.

Collaborators kicks off the 2012 NT Live season with a superb production of British theatre, and one that will resonate particularly with audiences in any country that has felt the oppression of fear.

Collaborators will be showing exclusively at Cinema Nouveau theatres nationally today, and January 25 and 26.

'War Horse' steals a piece of Steven Spielberg's heart

JAMES MOTTRAM

STEVEN Spielberg is talking about the best piece of advice he ever got.

It came from François Truffaut, the nouvelle vague director Spielberg cast in his 1977 sci-fi classic *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

He'd seen him perform in his own 1970 film, *The Wild Child*, and wrote the role of the French government scientist with him in mind.

"He even called me a 'wild child'," he says with a smile. "He told me, 'You're a kid. You must work with children. I loved the experience myself. I'd recommend it to you. You must go off and make a movie with kids.' And I never forgot that advice."

Speaking to the world's inner child, whether it's in films like *E.T.*, *Hook* or *Empire of the Sun*, arguably accounts for why Spielberg, 35 years on from that close encounter, remains the most suc-

cessful Hollywood director in history.

Today, he is holed up in L'Hôtel Le Bristol in Paris, the latest pit stop in a European tour to promote the new film, *War Horse*, his syrupy but stirring adaptation of the Michael Morpurgo novel.

Lately, he's been even giddier than usual, with the release of the long-in-the-works *Tintin* coinciding with post-production on *War Horse* and the shoot for his next, *Lincoln*, the 27th theatrical feature film of his 40-year career.

"When I don't have a story to tell, I'm a terror to live with," he admits. "Ask my wife (Kate Capshaw, to whom he's been married for 20 years) and my children what it's like to have me without a movie in my immediate future to direct. I mope. I walk around the house in a terrible state. I'm miserable when I don't have something that I can immediately jump into."

War Horse is an old-fashioned throwback to the films of John Ford, from *The Quiet Man* to *How*



Albert (Jeremy Irvine) and his horse Joey in 'War Horse'.

Green Was My Valley, with its lingering shots of the Devon countryside an almost too-simplistic contrast to the bloody realities of the Battle of the Somme, where the

story ends up. It was Spielberg's friend and producer, Kathy Kennedy, who recommended the book and the resulting West End play, claiming it was in his "wheel-

house". So entranced was he, *War Horse* took just seven months from the moment he commissioned the script to the first time he called "action" – a record it shares with *E.T.*

Spielberg reports that his youngest daughter Destry, 15, a horse enthusiast and a competitive rider, begged him to make *War Horse* for her. She needn't have worried, for this story of Joey, a courageous farm horse who gets swept up in the Great War and touches the lives of those he encounters, is like celluloid catnip to him. For this father of seven, "the family values, the salt-of-the-earth values, made this film something I couldn't resist", he admits.

Look deeper, and you can see that Spielberg, like so many sons, has always sought his father's approval, which may account for why films from *E.T.* to *Empire of the Sun* feature a boy with an absent father figure. – Foreign Service

War Horse opens in South Africa on February 24