

# ETCETERA

## Lies, spies and conspiracy theories in Russian thriller

**Playwright Rajiv Joseph wrote Describe The Night just as allegations surfaced of Russian complicity with the Trump election - but before the poisoning of double agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury.**

Spurred on by the debate around fake news and conspiracy theories, his play takes a broad historical sweep in a bid to highlight how hard it is to pin down the truth from lies.

Tracking between 1920 and 2010, it touches down on the 1920 Polish-Soviet war, Stalin's purge of 1936, a cold war KGB spy, and the fatal crash of an aircraft carrying the Polish government near the Russian city of Smolensk.

In the process he looks at how news is reported, starting with the character of Isaac Babel, a Jewish journalist embedded with the Red Cavalry in 1920, who tries to honestly depict the brutal horrors of war.

Ben Caplan, best known for playing Miranda Hart's policeman husband in *Call The Midwife* plays Babel and says it's "exciting to be part of something that is so current".

"Salisbury; the world's

Fake news, conspiracy theories and the slippery relationship between Russia and the rest of the world is the timely subject of Hampstead Theatre's latest play

relationship with Russia, putting on this play right now is extremely relevant. It feels theatre is reacting quickly to world events," he adds.

Caplan's research has included reading much of Babel's output, including his plays and short stories.

"He was not a writer I knew before this play, but I've fallen in love with the character," he says.

"He was a talented Russian writer stationed with the Red Cavalry as a war journalist who starts an unlikely friendship with a very powerful man called Nikolai Yezhov.

"His motivation to become a war journalist was to improve himself as a writer by getting close to real events. He described



Steve John Shepherd as Vova and Ben Caplan as Isaac Babel in *Describe the Night* at Hampstead Theatre. Picture: MARC BRENNER

the action he had seen and some horrific subject matter in his journal.

"For my research I have read a lot of his work and it is honest beautiful and brutal."

Babel falls in love with Yezhov's wife and they have an affair, which causes problems for him later on when the cuckolded husband becomes head of the NKVD overseeing Stalin's great purges of 1936-38.

"The play moves through history in a very loose, broad way looking at what's truth, what's lies, and how we cover news stories and report on current events," says Caplan.

"But it's also about love, hope and how people live through terrible times.

"Rajiv has taken the base of it from historical facts, but has been loose with them. That's the whole point, that actors and writers have a bit of licence to play around with the truth to honour the themes of the play - about how the truth has been meddled

with over the years."

A theme that emerges, which cimes with the Salisbury case, is the Russian habit of denying everything.

"The line is always, it's fake news. Never confess, it's nothing to do with us," says Caplan.

"When he was writing it, Rajiv was excited by Brexit, Trump, people potentially meddling in the election and the fact you don't really know what's the truth or not on the news.

"It's very unnerving that you can't read anything these days that you know 100 percent is the truth. You start to question everything you are being told and feel you don't know how to get information about what's happening in the world."

Caplan's father was a West End producer which meant he grew up going to the theatre and got "bitten by the bug early."

"I have gone to the theatre ever since I can remember and now as an actor I love doing theatre. My whole career I've always gone

back and forwards between screen and stage roles.

"I make a point of going back to the theatre. You can't underestimate how important it is to do live stage work."

Currently on an extended break from *Call The Midwife*, Caplan says he's loved doing the show for six years, but when Hart left to pursue other work, it made it awkward for his character.

"With Miranda not being in it, for me to be around without her was odd. Even though I am very fond of the show and grateful for the opportunity, I am taking a break but it's left open for me to possibly come back."

As for his latest role he adds: "It never stops being terrifying, but that's part of the buzz. If something scares me, I take it on as a challenge it's wonderful adrenaline."

**Bridget Galton**  
**Describe the Night Runs at Hampstead Theatre until June 9. Hampsteadtheatre.com**

### Theatre

#### ABSOLUTE HELL NATIONAL THEATRE

★★★★☆

Originally lambasted in 1952, and since reborn at the Orange Tree and then the National, Rodney Ackland's provocative play set in a seedy, post-war Soho club returns for an intriguing if not entirely convincing encore.

It features a mammoth cast and numerous story threads - not all of which reward investment. The most compelling strand is people escaping reality: through drink, sex, art, even founding a religion. Never mind political progress, represented by the Labour Party's headquarters across the street, nor

wartime horror stories (including the first images of concentration camps). Here, it's less *Blitz Spirit*, more blitzed.

Freed from the Lord Chamberlain's scrutiny, Ackland later made his characters' sexuality more explicit, so we have unconventional unions like an Austrian black-market trader pairing up with a socialite, who in turn seduces an American GI - the latter also hooking up with a man, and in line to become a movie star if a lecherous director has his way.

However, Joe Hill-Gibbins framing this impressionistic play in epic terms actually highlights its limitations.

Though there's striking ensemble action on Lizzie Clachan's multi-levelled set, the work isn't really state-of-the-nation cohesive, and the human moments become too

remote.

Great performances flesh out Ackland's characters, though, particularly Charles Edwards as washed-up writer Hugh, frantically trying to hide his debts from partner Nigel (effectively fastidious Prasanna Puwanarajah) and his well-meaning mother (endearing Joanna David).

Kate Fleetwood is striking but too sophisticated as club owner Christine, who craves company, while Sinead Matthews is superb as the liberal bohemian who doesn't actually get around to voting. There's also good support from Danny Webb, Liza Sadovy, Eileen Walsh, Patricia England and Jonathan Slinger.

An imperfect rediscovery, but still shrewd on all-too-human self-destruction, and a sharp rejoinder to nostalgia about past nobility. **Marianka Swain**



Kate Fleetwood in *Absolute Hell*

Picture: JOHAN PERSSON