COLLABORATORS

JOHN HODGE

National Theatre — Cottesloe Theatre

In *Collaborators*, the prominent, dissident Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov is coerced by Joseph Stalin into writing a play to celebrate the dictator's 60th birthday. In return the authorities will allow Bulgakov's play *Moliere* to be performed. The resulting Faustian pact is played out in a surreal and increasingly dark drama, in which Stalin becomes the author, and Bulgakov finds himself signing off Stalin's government papers. The set-pieces with the typewriter and the documents authorising the purges are surrounded by images of Stalin's Russia — the dispossessed aristocracy, leather-coated secret police, and food shortages. Simon Russell Beale wonderfully captures Stalin's wily rusticity, ruthlessness, and deadly paranoia, while Alex Jennings' elegant and anxious Bulgakov is hopelessly trapped by the imperative for complicity and the inevitability of betrayal. In the fantasy, his collaboration puts food on the table and halts the progression of his chronic renal failure, but for only as long as the pact remains intact.

This excellent play is written by John Hodge, a medical graduate, as was Bulgakov, and who wrote the screenplays for *Trainspotting* and *Shallow Grave*. It is based on historical fact — Stalin was a great fan of Bulgakov (he is reported to have seen *The White Guard* 15 times) and did get him to write a play about him. And he may well have said 'It's man versus monster Mikhail. And the monster always wins'.

Collaborators is at the National Theatre, London until 31 March 2012 and was broadcast live to 120 UK and international venues on 1 December 2011. *Collaborators* will then transfer to the Olivier Theatre from 30 April 2012.

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DOI: 10.3399/bjgp12X616436

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Simon Russell Beale as Joseph Stalin and Alex Jennings as Mikhail Bulgakov in Collaborators.

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