

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Stars in the Morning Sky

Alexander Galin, translated by Michael Glenny and Cathy Porter

Jagged Fence

Riverside Studios

(2008)

Stars are always in the sky: we just can't see them in the daytime. Alexander Galin's play presents themes of disguise and revelation in director Peter McAllister's timely revival, marking a twenty-year anniversary since its first staging at this venue.

In 1980, Russia's Olympic dream faced world condemnation over the invasion of Afghanistan; today, we approach a Beijing Olympics similarly fraught. *Stars*, set near Moscow that year, charts two days in the lives of a group of 'unmentionables' who must disappear, enabling the Olympic city to present a bright and shiny face to watching millions - again, a contemporary issue.

A pitch-dark Studio 3 meets the croaking strains of Vladimir Vysotsky, legendary Russian performer, who, coincidentally, died in 1980 (his presence can be imagined, glass of vodka in hand, singing to a sad guitar). With dark, aching tone now established, light floods the stage to reveal a harrowing display of rusty iron beds, soiled sheets, stained pillows and a floor bestrewn with dirty, upturned plates, cups, and empty vodka bottles.

The dormitory, a former asylum (inmates now moved to the new block), is a half-way house for a group of prostitutes whose presence must not besmirch the Olympic torch's imminent arrival. Overseeing the dorm is Valentina (Jan Hirst), embittered by the 'guests' she must house, and intent on protecting her only son, policeman Nikolai (Martin Maynard), from the imminent clutches of pregnant, under-age Maria (Emily Dobbs).

Also present are Anna (Rachel Fishwick), drunk on 'what-could-have-beens' and protective of Maria, in whom she recognises her own past, and Siobhan McSweeney's commanding and slightly terrifying Klara, black-leathered and bewigged, intent on finding fellow partner-in-crime Laura (Larissa).

Here, Emilie Patry excels: from her pseudo-glamorous entrance (suitcase and sunglasses, as if on an exciting jaunt), through her dissembling attempts to create an acceptable past persona, and her gradual disintegration into desperate reality, Laura personifies a Moscow wishing to metaphorically brush its own dirt under the carpet, and appear what it is not.

Her meeting with gaunt, haunted Alexander (Sebastian Aguirre), whose brief escape from the asylum presents a man who may or may not be a doctor of physics, and whom Laura sees as a potential saviour, adds pathos to proceedings.

Production Company Jagged Fence here fulfil their mission in presenting strong female roles. Though arguably less subversive than at its 1987 Leningrad inauguration, the play confronts topical, brutal issues, particularly in the second half where rape is implied, justifying an age

suitability warning of 14+. The translation is seamless and actors' regional accents are retained, creating a sense of variation and realism.

The stars of the title remain ambiguous: perhaps fireworks celebrating the flame's arrival; maybe the Russian athletes who, we are reminded, 'always win'; or possibly the girls themselves, ironically echoing Laura's assertion that 'women are born to beautify the world'. Their final act is hopeful and fearful in equal measure.

It is finely acted throughout, thought-provoking, and heightened my own appreciation, on leaving, of freedom under stars in a Hammersmith night sky.

Reviewer: [Anita-Marguerite Butler](#)