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If Mikhail Bulgakov's celebrated chef d'oeuvre was written as a dialectical as well as satirical critique of the Stalinist era, it is perhaps all the more chilling to recognize that it stabs an accusing finger - even in theatrical samizdat form - at the subversion of democracy and human decency today.

The Master and Margerita, hailed as one of the greatest novels of the 20th century, was not published in Bulgakov's lifetime and only appeared in censored form in the 1960s. The remarkable allegory is now reconceived for the stage by Theatre Complicite and its genius artistic director, Simon McBurney, who presents a profoundly disturbing spectacle that seems to have found a striking relevance and resonance in the 21st century.

The Faustian tale will not be unfamiliar to most readers, located within the Orwellian Soviet dystopia of Moscow. The

moral delusion and confusion of good and evil, the spectre of denunciation and state-managed disappearance, the conflict between religion and an ungodly world are all too clearly present today.

The production is phenomenal. What is now classic Complicite stagecraft transforms actual text into a vital experience. Technical wizardry in the form of massive video projections, real time relays of the stage from abstract perspectives, sound blasted at pain threshold levels, supports superlative acting. But it is the subtext that is equally impressive.

In a recent post-performance discussion at the Barbican Theatre in London, the LeCoq-trained actor, writer and director McBurney, who is also associate artist for the Avignon Festival, offered a surprisingly outspoken assessment of the political context which frames his production. "We are not living in a democracy. The multi-national corporations rule", he declared. No huffing and puffing from the bejewelled and well-heeled audience, instead murmurs of assent rippled through the stalls as well as the cheap seats.

Emboldened, McBurney, who founded Theatre Complicite almost 30 years ago, also referred implicitly to the current controversy surrounding the social, political and financial entanglements between the sleazier elements of the Fourth Estate (a.k.a. the Murdoch empire) and the Britain's even sleazier Westminster government (a.k.a. the ConDem coalition). It is one thing for the man in the street to say that politicians are corrupt, but McBurney, throwing caution to the wind, specified the present incumbent of No 10 Downing Street and his past press guru. No murmurs of dissent from the auditorium and one hopes no writs. The matter is still sub judice.

Still the subtlety is not lost. In many cases people simply turn away from confrontation with such a disturbing reality. Others take to the streets without focusing on where best to target their frustrations. We live in a time of choleric reactions that are diffused and readily defused. The masses are placated with bread and circuses, and almost willingly submit to the collective delusion that representative government has a grasp of the levers of power. Yet they cannot determine the form which pseudo-democracy takes, and have no control over the multi-national corporations which have become the real masters of nations' destinies.

So McBurney's clever co-option of Bulgakov's drama of dissent is in effect as much a coded condemnation of our present ruling regimes as was the original. At least his reinterpretation has not lain hidden for decades nor has it been subjected to the censor's black rule.

Neville Rigby

Theatre Complicite's production of *The Master and Margerita* will tour to Madrid, Vienna, Recklinghausen, Holland and Avignon between May and July.