Black and white war monologues stir hearts

As a schoolboy, I had to write about how I had spent my summer. Those were golden days filled with sunbathing, making friends, dancing, swimming and playing ball... Of course, anyone who lived through the fiercest years - like the characters in Svetlana Alexievich’s Last Witnesses — will feel differently. Minsk director Vladimir Savitsky recently staged the play for Vitebsk audiences.

By Sergey Goleniski

...The stage is full of elderly people who are asked to position on how they spent their childhood. People’s Artists Tades Kozatsky, Svetlana Okruzhnaya, and other experienced actors deliver monologues, speaking as 7-10 year old children who have witnessed torture and suffering. These war recollections are especially touching. Additionally, a real child’s voice sings the warm-hearted, tranquil song Very Star. It acts in discord against the stories of the main characters — confirming to us that childhood and war are two absolutely incomparable notions.

Svetlana Alexievich’s books have been published in over 20 countries and have served as the basis for documentaries and theatrical performances. The creators of the film note that the Brest Fortress project is the most complex in terms of production, with major sets constructed especially for the film. Cardboard ‘brick’ walls have appeared in the citadel, alongside a club and a bridge — destroyed during military fighting. The film’s special effects are being taken care of by a crew of around 70 people on the Belarussian side and almost the same number from Russia.

Brest Fortress looks set to premiere by Victory Day next year. Director Alexander Kort tells us that the picture has been designed as a full-length film, reconstructing true events and starring true heroes — the Brest Fortress defenders. The film is being overseen by the Union State’s Television and Radio Broadcasting Organisation.

Who is Alice?

Even Chris Norman has no answer to this question.

In Soviet times, it was impossible to dream of seeing the famous EnglishSmokie band singing live. They didn’t even appear on TV. Meanwhile, abroad, the young, hot-tempered guys filled stadiums with fans and topped musical hitlists. Glam-rock arrived many years later...

English Chris Norman — a legendary Smokie founder — was brought up in the best traditions of rock’n’roll and Beatles-mania. He recently visited Minsk to perform at the Yanka Kupala Theatre, where Mr. Savitsky works as its director-producer. Last year, he entered the script in a Culture Ministry contest dedicated to the 65th anniversary of Belarus’ libera tion and won. Later, after reading twenty monologues (of over a hundred in the electronic version), he realised that most of the stories centered around Smokie forests and the Zapadnaya Dvina River — where the fascists sank innocent people. He then had the idea of performing at the Vitebsk Yakol Drama Theatre, where Mr. Savitsky recently staged his musical comedy Whirl fers.

In Whirlfers, we used mostly young actors. Now, I’m asking, ‘What can I teach Honoured Artist of Belarus Valentina Petrichakova, who joined a guerrilla regiment as a child and saw everything her character is speaking of with her own eyes?’ All of the actors have treated this complicated material carefully and reverently. It’s impossible to hide behind theatrical displays or jokes; the stage is decorated exclusively in black and white — we see the actors as they are,” Mr. Savitsky asserts.

The film is impossible to paraphrase the plot of the story — since there is none. We simply have 20 childhood stories, each a cameo which explores a penetrating issue. We are pushed to think. For instance, the play asks us to consider whether we remember everything or our minds selectively ‘erase’. ‘A whole generation of children and teenagers faced awful suffering during the Great Patriotic War. How could they remain unaffected?’ wonders Mr. Savitsky.

‘How could they write poetry, give birth to children or sing songs having enduring such emotional torture? It seems impossible! However, they managed to survive, using their own will.” Mr. Savitsky admits that, this time, he has created a ‘theatre of questions’. Like his artistic team, he is interested in hearing answers — including from Vitebsk veterans. The latter were invited to the premiere as honourable guests.

Minsk is to host the performance in September, as part of the Vitebsk Yakol Drama Theatre troupe’s tour.

By Zhanna Kolesnikova

Shooting of Brest Fortress feature film begins at citadel over River Bug

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‘I’m a fortress, I’m fighting...’

By Zhanna Kolesnikova