



Sergei Korolyov (played by Darrell D'Silva) was celebrated after the success of the Sputnik satellite.

THEATRE

# The chief designer

A clever play shows how engineer Sergei Korolyov drove the Soviet space programme, finds **Philip Ball**.

It is a curious year of anniversaries for the former Soviet military-industrial complex. Fifty years ago, the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first person in space, orbiting the world for 108 minutes in the *Vostok 1* spacecraft. And 25 years ago, reactor four at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Ukraine exploded, sending a cloud of radioactive debris across northern Europe.

One triumph, one failure. Rona Munro's play *Little Eagles*, commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company for the Gagarin anniversary, understandably makes no mention of the later disaster, but connections assert themselves throughout.

Both events were fruits of the cold war nuclear age. The rockets made by Sergei Korolyov — chief architect of the Soviet space programme and the play's central character — armed President Nikita Khrushchev with intercontinental ballistic missiles before they took Gagarin to the stars. But the space programme degenerated along the same bureaucratic lines that made an exclusion zone of Chernobyl.

Impossible demands from technically clueless party officials, and

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the terror of engineers and operatives at the consequences of neglecting them, eventually compromised both technologies fatally — most notably

in *Little Eagles* in the crash of *Soyuz 1* in 1967, which killed cosmonaut Vladimir Komarov. Gagarin was listed as the backup pilot for that mission, but was by then too valuable a trophy to be risked in another space flight. All the same, Gagarin died a year later, during the routine training flight of a jet fighter.

Callous disregard for life marks Munro's play throughout. We first see Korolyov, a military rocket engineer, in the Siberian labour camp where he was sent during Stalin's purge of the officer class just before the Second World War. As the Soviets developed their rocket programme, the stupidity of sending someone so brilliant to a virtual death sentence dawned on the regime, and Korolyov was freed. During the 1950s, he gained control of the whole space enterprise, becoming known as the Chief Designer.

Munro's portrayal of Korolyov seems accurate, if the testimony of one of his chief scientists is anything to go by: "He was a king,

## Little Eagles

WRITTEN BY RONA MUNRO. DIRECTED BY ROXANA SILBERT. *Hampstead Theatre, London.* 16 April–7 May 2011.

a strong-willed purposeful person who knew exactly what he wanted ... he swore at you, but he never insulted you. The truth is, everybody loved him." Portrayed in the Hampstead Theatre production by Darrell D'Silva, he is a swaggering, cunning, charming force of nature, playing the system so that he might realize his dream of reaching for the stars. He reciprocates the love of his 'little eagles', the cosmonauts chosen with an eye on the *Vostok* capsule's height restrictions. (Even today the *Soyuz* capsule excludes tall cosmonauts.)

But for the leaders of the Soviet Union, rocketry was merely weaponry, a way of demonstrating superiority over their foes in the West. Korolyov becomes a hero for beating the Americans with Sputnik, and then for *Vostok 1*. But when the thuggish, foul-mouthed Khrushchev (played by a terrifying Brian Doherty) is retired in 1964 in favour of Leonid Brezhnev, the game changes. Brezhnev sees no virtue in Korolyov's dream of a Mars mission, and worries instead that the Americans will beat them to the Moon. The rushed and bungled *Soyuz 1*, launched after Korolyov's death in 1966, was the result.

Out of this fascinating but chewy material, Munro has woven a moving and often beautiful tale. Gagarin's own story is a subplot. Grounded as a toy of the Politburo, we see his sad descent into the vodka bottle but not his ignominious end — that is too much to be shoehorned into this packed play. Nevertheless, it is a satisfying and wise production.

The play might be regarded as a foil to *The Right Stuff*, Tom Wolfe's 1979 account of the US space programme, which was made into an exhilarating film in 1983. Wolfe's celebration was a fitting tribute to the courage and ingenuity that took humans to the Moon, but a glimpse at the other side of the coin was long overdue. There is something awesome as well as awful in the grinding resolve of the Soviets to win the space race relying on just the chief engineer, "convicts and some university students", as Munro puts it.

*Little Eagles* shows us the mix of noble and ignoble impulses in the space race that the US programme, with its Columbus rhetoric, still cannot afford to acknowledge. The play recognizes the glory of seeing the stars and Earth from beyond the atmosphere, but reveals the human space-flight programmes as a product of their tense times, as nationalistic black holes for dollars and roubles (and now yuan too). And, like Chernobyl, such politically motivated displays are open to mistakes not from excessive ambition but from fear of failure.

Crucially, Munro leaves the final judgement to the audience. "They say you changed the whole sky and everything under it," Korolyov's physician says to him in the final lines. "What does that mean?" ■

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