

# Oh, those Russians: The Gamm's "Describe the Night" walks us through 100 years of Russian history



*Michael Liebhauser as Isaac, Donnlá Hughes as Yevgenia. Photo by Cat Laine.*

Deception has a way of weaving a complex, strangling web that changes lives and the course of history, a theme that basically defines life in Russia, historically and today.

That culture of suspicion and fear permeates *Describe the Night*, the Gamm Theatre season opener. Moving between three distinct times - 1920 during Russia's invasion of Poland, 1989 as a KGB agent woos a woman he's spying upon, and 2010 after a plane crash that killed most of the Polish government - the show is epic.

While epic translates into long - and this is just under three hours - the flow is smooth as liberties taken by playwright Rajiv Joseph interweave story lines tighter and tighter.

On a basic two-part stage consisting of a pair of stands at the front and, behind a curtain, a brick wall of compartments to portray homes, offices and the Berlin Wall, *Describe the Night* moves across 90 years with a flip of a screen, each of which details location and year.

It opens as Russian writer Isaac Babel struggles to capture life on the battlefield as a correspondent in the Polish-Russian War, then as he and a soldier pal assimilate back into civilian life, clashing over morality as the Cold War ensues. Babel's diary passes down through the decades, drawing strangers together to honor its messages.

Joseph explores suppression under Stalin, the softer Glasnost introduced by Mikael Gorbachev and the brutality of newcomer Vladimir "Vova" Putin. His words are often chilling and prescient, given the current war Putin is waging against Ukraine. Words like "subversive" and statements that the black marker is the "most useful tool in Russian government" underscore the mystery.

"If you say it's true, it becomes true. If you say it's false, it becomes false," one character says.

Director **Tony Estrella's** interpretation of *Describe the Night* is as important as Joseph's script. Through subtle touches like a faint fog permeating every scene, or the coaching of his cast, he crafts an almost immersive historic experience.

Moments such as when actor **Jeff Church**, as Vova, thrashes about under the influence of a truth serum, are riveting. The audience, despite the three-hour length of the show, is spellbound. Church visibly transforms from low-level thug to slick, still thuggish, world leader, with a palpable haughtiness.

The show's other startling transformation comes from **Donnla Hughes**, who plays Yevgenia, the woman Babel loves, when she marries his friend Nikolai. While her character ages, and Hughes skillfully transitions from nubile to elderly, that isn't her most startling work. She is sent to an asylum, where subversive ideas are grounds for death, where Hughes transforms her character to a shell of her former self. She seems emaciated and shrunken, physically and emotionally, a visible reminder of oppression's toll.

*Describe the Night* is, indeed, epic. It leaves audiences wondering "what if" about points in history, it prompts deepened concern over the machinations of communism and it questions the strength of the human spirit in the face of evil. It moves viewers in ways great and small, which is the power of theater. The show continues at Gamm through October 9. For more information, go to [www.gammtheatre.org](http://www.gammtheatre.org).