

When the town was painted red

Niki Austin sees the revival of a forgotten play about the onset of Communism

ALTHOUGH Isaac Babel wrote the play *Marya* in 1935, he never saw it performed. Rehearsals started at a theatre in Moscow, but the Communist regime censored it immediately. To this day, it has never managed to reach the stage in Russia, and has only had one performance in Britain.

But a 31-year-old Dutchman of Jewish descent, Maarten Laurens, is now responsible for bringing it to London. Having grown up in what he believes to be the theatrical confines of Holland where text theatre is often superseded by visual theatre, he left his home to study at the Moscow School of Dramatic Art. Last summer, he moved to London which he considers to be "the world capital for theatre".

Fired by a love for *Marya*, Maarten chose to adapt this virtually unknown play for the London stage.

The story follows an hour in the lives of people caught in the turmoil of the early days of Bolshevik rule. Through his play, Babel presents us with different forms of society and how individuals adjusted to the new regime.

Grossman is a Jewish businessman who survives the Communist way of life by smuggling food into St Petersburg in the clothes of ex-soldiers who are absolved from the obligatory searches. He is being pursued by a high society girl called Ludmila who, having lost all her wealth, is intent on marrying him.

The play has a total of 14 characters, but rather than a fight for stage space, each person appears for a limited period throughout the play. In a bizarre twist, all the characters are replaced by an entirely new cast in the last scene to represent the next cycle in life. Maarten calls this technique "a movie-esque way of telling

a story as we see flashes of people's lives."

What is uncanny about this play is its modern parallels. Maarten explains: "The same problems exist today. We have seen Communist society being replaced by an allegedly new system, only for the same situation to crop up again. Today, you can find former professors selling trinkets on the street, and girls being forced into prostitution for money."

As for the playwright, Babel was arrested in 1939 and taken to the Lubyanka prison in Moscow. He was never seen or heard of again until his death certificate was delivered to his family 13 years later.

'Marya' is part of the Russian Theatre Festival being held at the King's Head Theatre in Islington. 'Marya' runs until April 19. For tickets, call the box office on 0171 226 1916.