PROPAGANDA -

A New Musical

By Conor Mitchell

“Propaganda, A New Musical” by Conor Mitchell premiers at this year’s Belfast International Festival. Set in the ruins of Berlin following the defeat of the Nazis, it deals with a group of people surviving as best they can in the Russian controlled sector, which was one of four sectors set up by the Allies, France, GB, USA and USSR.

The Berlin Blockade occurred when France, UK and USA introduced a new currency, the Deutschmark into their sectors. The Soviets used this as an excuse to close off all land and river routes to Berlin’s western Sectors, causing the supply of food and fuel to be halted. However, due to a prior agreement that the Soviets dared not breach, America and Britain flew in thousands of transport planes, dropping off supplies, though just enough to feed each citizen around 2000 calories per day. Life was very tough.

Eventually the Berlin Wall would be erected to stop the haemorrhaging of East German citizens to West Berlin and West Germany.

Living in a blitzed out apartment block in the Russian Sector we meet Hanna and her boyfriend Slavi, a photographer, Ruddy a USA Red Cross worker, Magda their neighbour with a past, Margot, a notable actress and her manager Gerhardt, as well as Comrade Poliakoff and the Red Army soldiers.

SCENERY: Designed by Connor Murphy.

When we first enter the theatre the words “BERLIN 1949, SOVIET SECTOR” are projected in capital letters onto the back wall of the stage behind a gauze curtain.

The floor of the stage has been elevated, and is supported by scaffolding which allows us to look down into the basement of the theatre where live music is played by an orchestra. A set of open work metal stairs with hand railings runs from the right of the basement to the raised stage floor where we look upwards to see the action taking place. These stairs represent the stairwell of the apartment block, allowing the actors to enter and exit Salvi and Hanna’s bedsit.

On the right side of the bedsit is a radio and a wooden coat stand with a grey jacket bearing a Red Cross insignia. A photographic light and two standard lamps, one with a fringed shade and the other with a barley twist base sit to the left of the coat stand. In the front of the lamps is a square table with four plain wooden chairs that are moved about as required. A small circular bedside table with a red cover sits to the right of a double bed with a yellow cover and a wrought iron headboard and base. A camera tripod sits near the bed and there is a record player on a small set of drawers against the wall of the room to our left. Later lines of drying black and white photos will drop from the ceiling.

In front of us a metal railing runs along the length of the bedsit where the actors pause to look out across the city scape below. A few stairs on the extreme right of the bedsit leads to a sloping gantry with a hand rail leading to the apartment block’s roof top, but this is only visible when illuminated.

The bedsit and its contents remain throughout the musical, with furniture moved as required. It doubles as Magdalene’s room and also that of Comrade Poliakoff when a large poster of Stalin is draped from the ceiling.

In the show clips of original news broadcasts, in black and white are projected onto the rear of the stage. These give us a timeline and helps explain the situation as it unfolds both in Germany and throughout the world.

Lighting is used to good effect, with spot lights focusing our attention where needed. They also give the impression of search lights scanning the city streets, and giving a threatening atmosphere in the bedsit.

The orchestra plays a mixture of big band sounds, opera, as well as Russian popular songs and reflects the experience of the characters at the time.

CHARACTERS AND COSTUMES: Connor Murphy.

Hanna (Joanna O’Hare) Slavi’s muse and partner is very pretty, tall and shapely with long red wavy hair. She wears a green or red ankle length dress buttoned down the front with long sleeves. She poses for Slavi in satin bra, knickers, and suspender belt with flesh coloured stockings. She wears a satin nightdress at bedtime. When meeting Comrade Poliakoff she wears a full red skirt, white short sleeved blouse, red heeled shoes and a red beret.

Slavi (Darren Franklin) is Hanna’s partner. He is a photographer who “suffers for his art” but finds himself reduced to taking naughty images of prostitutes which he sells via his friend Ruddy. He is of medium height, black short hair with a thin moustache and beard and at times wears glasses. He wears a cream open-necked shirt and dark trousers with braces. He wears a grubby yellow raincoat with a hood and a soft hat when he goes out. He drinks heavily and can be violent towards Hanna. He carries a portfolio of photographs and his belongings in an old suitcase.

Ruddy Wolff (Oliver Lidert) is a member of the American Red Cross working within the Russian Sector, with a lucrative side line in selling raunchy images. He is tall and stocky with a bald head. He is in love with Hanna but realizes that as a black man they would have no future back in America. He wears a plain grey serge uniform with the Red Cross insignia on the sleeves and a tricorn style US Army Military hat. He carries a brown suitcase in which he carries supplies and Salvi’s photographs that he sells on his behalf.

Magdalene Von Furstenberg (Rebecca Caine) is a woman with a past who is a friend and neighbour of Hanna and Slavi’s. Before the war she was a renowned pianist and musician. She is an older woman, tall and thin with high cheekbones. Her hair is wound in a tight plait round her head as was the German style of the times. Having lost all but two pieces of her wardrobe during a bombing raid, she wears a dusty long white ball gown with multiple layers of netting and a full skirt. It is stained along the bottom. The only other costume she possesses is a scarlet satin ball gown with a full skirt and a low back which she wore to concerts. She drapes a shawl round her shoulders at night and has a long blue opera cape as a coat.

Margot (Celia Graham) is a famous actress. She is middle aged, tall and slim with glossy blonde hair. When we first meet her she is wearing a flowing satin evening coat. For a photographic shoot she wears a tailored white suit with wide legged trousers, a black blouse with a white tie, a soft brimmed felt hat. She has a black and white checked coat draped over her shoulder and wears white strappy sandals. She is a sophisticated woman but rather vain.

Gerhardt Baumann (Matthew Cavan) is Margot’s personal assistant. He is tall and thin with an angular face. He has a moustache and dark short hair. He is quite effeminate in his gestures. He wears a loose fitting grey suit with revers and buttoned at the waist as was the style in the 1940’s which he sometimes covers with a heavy overcoat. He wears a soft hat and carries a suitcase everywhere. It contains mirrors and combs for grooming Margot and also papers which he is careful to conceal.

Comrade Poliakoff (Sean Kearns) is a tall thin, stern older man. He has a white beard and white hair. He wears a grey suit with a white shirt and tie, over which he wears a three quarter length dark coat. He wears a soft hat, and when in his office he wears a waist coat over his white shirt and smokes a pipe. He is always accompanied by a group of Red Army soldiers.

The Red Army Soldiers (Adam Ashford, James Cooper, Wayne English, Harrison Gordon, Michael Sage, and Mark Tilley) are all dressed in Russian great coats emblazoned with the Hammer and Sycle, and hats with ear flaps. They carry rifles and carry out the orders of Comrade Poliakoff.

This show is approximately 2hrs.35mins long, with a short interval between acts 1 and 2. It contains scenes of a sexual nature.