SARCOPHAGUS
A new play by Vladimir Gubaryev.
Translated by Michael Glenny.
Starring David Brisbin.
Directed by David Chambers.
Translated by Michael Glenny.

By JULIAN WEST

CHERNobyL was supposed to be a showpiece. It was destined to be the largest power plant in the world, incorporating the most modern equipment and safety features. But, Lucifer-like, the best and the brightest fell. On April 26, 1986, a gas explosion blew the top off of reactor number four, killing 31 people, and forcing the evacuation of 100,000. Increased radiation levels were detected throughout Europe.

As the science editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda, Vladimir Gubaryev was one of the first journalists to visit Chernobyl and the surrounding area. Unable to convey his personal reaction in his newspaper article alone, he turned to the theater to help "bridge the distance between myself and my readers."

His powerful, human appeal has been an enormous success in several Soviet cities and elsewhere in Europe. September 18 marked its North American debut — on both coasts. Sarcophagus was considered to be sufficiently important that separate productions opened simultaneously in Los Angeles and New Haven.

Fortunately, the Yale Rep proved to be entirely capable of handling the honor. Their production is solid but not showy, a simple approach which allows Gubaryev's talent to shine through effectively. The action of the play takes place entirely in a special Moscow hospital for radiation victims. It has room for ten patients, each tended in special rooms with modern monitoring equipment. Panels outside each room and at the nurses' station allow the staff to keep track of all of their patients. It is, like Chernobyl, a showpiece, and it is occupied by exactly one patient.

This privileged individual is a medical miracle, having taken what ought to be a lethal dose of radiation when he fell asleep in a laboratory in a drunken stupor. Not only has he survived the incident, and a string of transplant operations, by 16 months, but his sense of humor has survived as well.

David Brisbin portrays this man without a past with a brilliant playfulness, which nevertheless shows that he understands the gravity of the situation. Doomed to live out his days in the hospital, he has cut himself off from his past and abandoned his name, preferring to be called "Bessmertny" — "Immortal."

Living with only the doctor for company, he flirts with her outrageously. His life has become, for him, no more or less than his daily crossword. His comic relief is disturbingly irrelevant: one of his best lines is "it must be serious, nothing's on the radio."

April Shawhan, too, is excellent as the doctor, Anna Petrovna, whose professionalism is colored by a human concern and compassion. She is happy with her job, with its modern facilities. She is also pleased, of course, with the lack of critically injured patients, scientifically frustrating though it may be.

All that is about to change. The telephone rings and Anna Petrovna answers calmly. There has been an "accident" at Chernobyl. Together with three rookie nurses who happen to be getting a preliminary loan, she is about to be inundated with badly irradiated patients.

The ten rooms fill up with nine new patients, who form a cross-section of Soviet society. Each has, for one reason or another, been particularly badly hit by the radiation from the damaged reactor.

Many, if not all, of the characters seem to have been based on real people Gubaryev met as a reporter. Most important among them is the director of the power plant (David Little), whose mismanagement was partly responsible for the safety of Chernobyl. Together with three rookie nurses who happen to be getting a preliminary loan, she is about to be inundated with badly irradiated patients.

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