“We could have run away but we didn’t…”

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system being shut down at the time of the accident. More details came out: he allowed a banded, inflammable substance to be used as roofing for the control room, because “we had a lot of it in stock,” and after the accident he drove his children to safety before reporting the explosion.

There is also a great counter operator (Frank Savino) who did not believe his own readings, sending another worker (Tom McCraw) to work by the exposed reactor core.

A heroic fireman (and there were many at Chernobyl in reality) performed his duty despite the danger, as played by Steven Skybell, for the sake of his injuries, and even begins to classify one of the victims. Similarly heroic is a physicist (David Beloff) who tried to gather data; he realizes his data is valuable and irreproducible, and is desperate to publish before perishing.

An incompetent general (Clarence Fowler) and his driver (Stephen Mendillo) drove up to the reactor after the accident; a sul.len, angry cyclist and a peasant woman were innocent bystanders in the wrong place at the wrong time.

As the nameless characters pile in, we begin to realize the cleverness of Craig Clipper’s stage design. The ten “cubicles” are displayed in two tiers of five doors each, with a staircase on one side providing access to the upper level. Entries and exits are through a central corridor. We soon learn to identify the characters not only by occupation but by room number, and the openness of the set allows for many things to occur in different areas in quick succession.

Flashing lights outside the cubicles draw our attention to individuals displaying symptoms of radiation sickness. The tidy display of doorways, also, provides graphical information — the lights are dimmed one by one as the characters begin to die. So much is going on so quickly, as the skeleton staff is nearly run off its feet, that the deaths are made almost incidental. The deaths emerge from a cubicle, and relentlessly dim the lights. In particular, the death of the fireman, minutes after he protested his perfect health, is set out as a model of sculpture. This makes it all the more chilling.

Michael Glesney’s transition is powerful and natural. It is so good that we might forget that this is a translation, especially as it is on a subject which concerns us all.

But the Russian origin of the work comes through consistently in the issues it presents and the way in which it views them. The play is preoccupied with domestic issues, including the openness of Soviet society. As a result, it provides — for us onlookers — a glimpse inside the Soviet Union, an insight of what might be wrong with the system, as well as an examination of what went wrong at Chernobyl in particular. Afghanistan, alcoholism, and peasant each get a mention.

The major concern is not the policy of nuclear power itself, but the incompetence and corruption dominant in Soviet bureaucracy. This is a serious issue; one year after Gubaryev wrote Seraphim, the director of the plant was sentenced to ten years for his mismanagement.

The condemnation of the guilty is obvious in the text, as the characters round on the incompetent director, who seems destined to survive. It is voiced best by the control-room operator who deliberately walked into the jaws of death: “we could have run away but we didn’t — you find out (what went wrong), or we are going to die here for nothing.”

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