By Elayne Jude, Great North News Services

How are we to apprehend the last hours of the 118 souls lost aboard the submarine Kursk in August 2000?

Perhaps by steeping ourselves in the reconstructed daily lives of the crew of an (almost imaginary) British Trafalgar class submarine, on covert patrol in the Barents Sea at the same time.

Imaginary, as this is the premise of Sound&Fury Theatre Company's current production at the Young Vic; absolutely realised, in a multidimensional production based on Bryony Lavery's watertight script.

The crew performs its drills within a blue-gray exoskeleton of gangways, platforms, trunking and bunks. Workstations blink alarm; through the attack periscope the captain monitors the shadowy movements of other leviathans, hulking natural and unnatural in the frigid deep.

The audience shares the same pressing exigencies of space as the cast/crew shoulders its way past to eat, sleep, play, squabble; to send and receive, from this extraordinary monochrome capsule, familygrams coloured by the most quotidian and enduring emotions: I love you, I want you, I miss you, you've got a new baby, we've got a new pram; the neighbour has fixed the heating you couldn't, put up shelves, doesn't want any money for it, repainted your beloved shed.

The play's biggest surprise is how funny it is, a boisterous ensemble humour born of unrelenting exposure to every captive intimacy. These men are together 24 hours a day for the entirety of the mission. Bunks are shared by shift rotation; there is no place to hide, and when a crewman thinks he has found one, the captain frantically orders overhaul, check and furious recheck to source the ticking that cannot be accounted for.

A submarine is all ears, its huge blunt bulk focused on hearing and interpreting the smallest murmur in the sea.

At patrol depth, there are no margins; not for indiscipline; not for ill-humour; not for any slight or inconsideration, or any other behaviourial luxury. The captain cannot abide any jeopardy to three key resources; bog roll; water; and food. He cannot risk the emotional capsize of his crew. Like the discreet MoD masthead on the communique bearing devastating personal news for one crewman, these details are so well thought out and integrated in the logic of the narrative that we are educated without our really knowing it.

Forget about the usual cosy bum on seat night out at the theatre. Sound&Fury attempt a totality

of experience, drawing us in collectively through the intellect and the senses. It is impossible, crowded in the anonymous dark, not to engage. We cannot say if the guy aloft in the crow's nest or queasily uplit at his console is the sound engineer or a junior midshipman; only that it is right and perfect that he should be exactly there, doing exactly that. We adopt as ship's mascot the nest of Russian dolls, exotic lacquer red against the strict naval palette, proxy for their fleet. We are sirened by mer-creatures, butted by whales, hit in the viscera by the shock waves, when they come, of the destruction of the Kursk.

We feel the solid building descend into the pitch dark, when all is told and all that is left is ragged breath and a few desperate words of an alien language.

We translate; not in the rational shallows of the unilateral mind, which is fragile and factional; nor yet with the manipulated heart; but where we most truly live and die,where the depth charges of apprehension are palpable, the lurch in the gut as the boat goes down, metal screaming as it breaks up, masking the screams of the crew, dying together.

And then the final dilemma. They aren't there. But they are.

Kursk runs at the Young Vic, The Cut, Waterloo, London, till June 27.

Box Office: 020 7922 2922

www.youngvic.org

Editor's note : I've seen it too. The realism is startling. The Royal Navy submarine service is the crème de la crème. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things, making sacrifices in their lives – and sometimes of their lives - for the rest of us who just sit at home and complain.

I thought I wouldn't enjoy it.

I was wrong.

I thought the detail would be wrong.

It isn't.

Don't miss it.