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## “Bringing Back the Essential Meaning of the Theatre”: Harold Pinter and the Belarus Free Theatre

### Summary

The Belarus Free Theatre was founded in 2005 by Belarusian playwright and journalist Nikolai Khalezin and theatre producer Natalia Koliada. It is a dissident company which opposes the totalitarian regime of Lukashenko; therefore, in Belarus it must work underground. In 2005 the Belarus Free Theatre invited Tom Stoppard to Minsk. During his visit he warmly suggested that they stage Pinter's plays: “It seems to me it's yours.” After working on Pinter's plays, they eventually came up with an original production: *Being Harold Pinter*.

In my essay I delineate how, in *Being Harold Pinter*, Pinter's works are shown under the reinvigorating new light of an urgent political theatre. I also discuss how the Belarus Free Theatre found a symbolic, essential and critical artistic language by which, “they are bringing back the essence meaning of the theatre,” as Pinter remarked.

**Key words:** Belarus Free Theatre, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard

## »Vračanje gledališča v njegovem temeljnem pomenu«: Harold Pinter in Belorusko svobodno gledališče

### Povzetek

Belorusko svobodno gledališče (Belarus Free Theatre) sta leta 2005 ustanovila beloruski dramatik in novinar Nikolai Khalezin ter gledališka producentka Natalia Koliada. Gre za disidentsko gledališko skupino, ki nasprotuje totalitarnemu Lukašenkovemu režimu, zaradi česar je v Belorusiji prisiljena delovati v ilegali. Leta 2005 je Belorusko svobodno gledališče v Minsk povabilo Toma Stopparda. Med obiskom je prijazno predlagal, da uprizorijo Pinterjeve drame: »Zdi se mi, da so za vas«. Po delu s Pinterjevimi dramami so pripravili lastno produkcijo z naslovom *Biti Harold Pinter* (Being Harold Pinter).

V eseju prikažem, kako so v drami *Biti Harold Pinter* dramatikova dela prikazana v povsem novi poživljajoči luči nujno potrebnega političnega gledališča. Razpravljam tudi o tem, kako je Belorusko svobodno gledališče odkrilo simbolni, temeljni umetniški jezik, s katerim nam »vrača gledališče v njegovem temeljnem pomenu«, kot je pripomnil Pinter.

**Ključne besede:** Belorusko svobodno gledališče, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard

# “Bringing Back the Essential Meaning of the Theatre”: Harold Pinter and the Belarus Free Theatre

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 A Dissident Life in Belarus

“Thank you for coming here. You must be very brave”,<sup>1</sup> these were the words with which Zmitser Bandarenka met me at the underground, illegal Fortinbras studio theatre, a small, wrecked one-storey house in the outskirts of Minsk which served as headquarters for the Belarus Free Theatre, a dissident – and therefore banned – company that opposes the totalitarian Belarusian regime. It was a chill night in September 2009, and I was there because I had been invited by the Free Theatre to lead a workshop on Beckett’s theatre with their apprentices and some of the company’s actors. On that night, after my daily work, I had stayed there to assist with a performance of the company. The tiny and essential space of the theatre – “This is a bare space,” as Mark Ravenhill described it, “but one that has been scrupulously prepared” (2008) – was filled, incredibly, by a crowd of fifty spectators brought together by a complex system of e-mails and text messages. As it happens, performances of the Free Theatre are forbidden – and thus unlicensed – so they cannot advertise their shows. For the same reason they cannot rely on ticket sales; therefore, they must make the best of what their patrons freely leave in a wooden box at the entrance. The experience of participating in the event was priceless. It was one of those rare moments when you actually take part in a theatrical event, a very rare opportunity. As Peter Brook schematically remarked when interviewed by Jean Kalman about events in theatre, “An event requires two conditions: firstly, an explosion – in other words, a change in temperature generated by a meeting; and secondly, that the meeting produces an action which is interesting because of its significance – and this is in fact the real event” (Kalman 1992, 107).

Playwright Laura Wade, who taught at Fortinbras a couple of weeks before me, after attending a performance of the company in that same place, was equally impressed: “It wasn’t just another night at the theatre” (2010), she later reported in *The Guardian*.

At the end of the performance, I was introduced to some of the people who attended the show, and that is how I met Zmitser Bandarenka. Actually, he is not a member of the Free Theatre; he is a civil activist, a journalist, and a close friend of Nikolai Khalezin and Natalia Koliada, founders and artistic directors of the Free Theatre. After taking part in the mass protest of 19 December 2010 against the fraud in the re-election of the totalitarian president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, Bandarenka was jailed, together with seven out of nine candidates who had dared to run for president against the dictator. More than 700 people were arrested that night, crammed into police vans and thrown into dank and often overcrowded prison cells; they are labelled by the

<sup>1</sup> The quotation is taken from a personal interview with Zmitser Bandarenka given on 6th September 2009, and it was originally spoken in Belarusian, Natalia Koliada translated for me. The original would sound “Dziakuj, što pryjšo siudy. Vy pavinny być viełmi advažnym.”

regime as “enemies of the people,” a phrase dating from Stalin-era purges. On 27 April 2011, Bandarenka was sentenced to two years in a penal colony, having been accused and found guilty of “organising group actions that breach public order” (Zmitser Bandarenka sentenced to two years in penal colony 2011), while he was peacefully expressing his political view. He still refuses to request a pardon from Lukashenko, the illegitimate head of State who holds power merely because he rigged the elections. In 2011, Bandarenka was among the three shortlisted finalists for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

This is just a case in point of what happens to a dissident living in Belarus. No form of dissent from the regime of Lukashenko is tolerated: KGB agents (Belarus can boast of being the only country where the secret service of Soviet times still fully operates and maintains its haunting name) are in charge of keeping under surveillance the population and repressing every attempt to denounce the brutality, the arbitrary power, and the corruption of the regime. After the demonstration of December 2010, in the following months hundreds of people started to gather down the streets of central Minsk, outside the buildings of the administration. At first, they shouted “*Žyvie Bielaruś!*”, that is “Long Live Belarus!” in the Belarusian language which, in the pro-Russian regime of Lukashenko, has become a sort of dialect. That particular exclamation has been proscribed: as a matter of fact, we could easily call it a “Mountain Language”. However, since many of them were arrested, even though they were performing a nonviolent action, they decided to change their strategy. So, while walking down the streets of Belarusian cities, they started to clap their hands and laugh ironically at the regime. Just for performing this symbolic and peaceful protest, most of them have been brought to Americanka, the KGB detention centre. Therefore, now in Belarus it is strictly forbidden to applaud and to smile: imagine how tragic is Lukashenko’s perpetuation of power.

## 1.2 Birth and Life of a Company

No wonder, then, that one should look for a way to express one’s own ideas. In March 2005, journalist and playwright Nikolai Khalezin and his wife, theatre producer Natalia Koliada, set up a theatre company – the Belarus Free Theatre – because they thought that theatre was the only means to elude censorship and control. They envisaged it as a “civil initiative,” a project to promote political and social commitment to safeguard basic civil rights. They clearly stated in their Manifesto that the Free Theatre Project would end “when the situation in Belarus changed from dictatorial regime to democracy” (Manifesto 2005). Their theatrical creativity is thus essential and not just a matter of aesthetic or intellectual choice.

In May 2005, stage director Vladimir Scherban joined them. The first play they presented was Sarah Kane’s *4:48 Psychosis*, which deals with themes that are taboo in Belarusian society, let alone if they could be explored in art. No wonder, then, that members of the Free Theatre were persecuted by the authorities just for staging that play. The owner of the café where they staged it lost his license; the director and the actors lost their jobs in Belarus State theatres. Nonetheless, they kept working and staging plays in private apartments, even in the woods; but what is most remarkable is their capacity to create great theatre through powerful performances and highly emotional playtexts under such impossible conditions. As Michael Billington

wrote in *The Guardian*, “What strikes me [about Belarus Free Theatre] is their wit, vitality and inventiveness” (2008). Over the years they have toured all around the world and managed to gain an international reputation in spite of the continuous harassment perpetrated by Belarusian authorities. They have also been successful in receiving artistic and political patronage from a large support group of artists, from Ian McKellen to Jude Law, from Mark Ravenhill to Kevin Spacey, from Mick Jagger to Vaclav Havel, from Tom Stoppard to Harold Pinter and many others. Such support does not arise from mere compassion for the exiled and unfortunate: it is rather a sign of respect and admiration for the work and the struggle of the Free Theatre. They have helped much more than any institution – the European Union or any national government always get entangled in the mesh of Realpolitik. The solidarity they express is really intended as mutual support between artists, because they know artists can speak for those who cannot; being the conscience, the vigilant watchmen of a country’s freedom of speech, they must exercise such a right. While speaking into a megaphone at a public protest for the release of political prisoners outside the Embassy of Belarus in London on 28 March 2011, Kevin Spacey asserted, “When you look at the history of our civilization whenever there’s been a protest or a revolt or a revolution, it is the artists, it is the playwrights, it is the poets, the actors, the intellectuals who are jailed and silenced, and why? Because even dictators know that it is the artists who can best speak to a nation’s hopes and dreams and future. It is the artists, and so we march today for the artists” (Spacey 2011, 0:54-2:28).

### 1.3 Tom Stoppard Meets the Belarus Free Theatre, the Belarus Free Theatre Meets Harold Pinter

What gave hope to Khalezin and Koliada was the possibility to replicate the process that Czechoslovakia underwent, against Soviet oppression, to become a democracy through the Velvet revolution inspired and guided by dramatist Vaclav Havel. They explicitly stated they were inspired by what happened on the underground stage of Prague in the Seventies. Tom Stoppard, who strongly sustained Havel and has spoken out firmly on behalf of other Czech dissidents since the foundation of the company, is their most active patron. When at the beginning of summer 2005 Natalia Koliada asked him to sign a letter in support of the newly born company, he readily did so. In August he went to Minsk to teach young Belarusian playwrights and meet artists and writers. While talking in a Minsk café, he asked Natalia, Nikolai and Vladimir, “Have you ever read Pinter’s plays?”, and, as a good friend, he suggested that they look at the plays and think about staging them, since he thought they were in tune with their condition.

Harold Pinter is an outstanding example of an artist who has felt the duty to show his solidarity forthrightly to victims of acts of despotism throughout his life. In the latter part of his career as a playwright, he also became a political figure, a polemicist who carried on fierce battles against all kind of injustice, abuses of power, and most of all the hypocrisy of politics. His example clearly shaped a model of uncompromising, unswerving and resolute conduct. The founders and members of the Free Theatre resolved to be, indeed, Harold Pinter. A year after their meeting with Stoppard, the idea of working on Pinter’s plays developed into something definite and eventually took the shape of one of their first shows, *Being Harold Pinter*.

## 2. *Being Harold Pinter*

When at the beginning of September 2006 they started work on the project, the first problem they had to face was getting the texts of Pinter's plays. There was not a single copy in English anywhere in Belarus; the only translation available was in Russian and it wasn't even complete. Once they got them from a Moscow bookshop, they realized that such plays as *Ashes to Ashes* and *The New World Order* – plays that would be so relevant for their project – were missing. They eventually got these via e-mail through a friend, who scanned and sent the texts from Paris to Minsk. Meanwhile, they studied what they had at hand and collected interviews, statements and speeches they could find on the internet. Finally, Pinter's acceptance speech when he was awarded the Nobel prize for Literature provided the coordinates for entering his world. And the guide could be no one other than Pinter himself, in fact a narrator who would take the audience through Pinter's creative process and present excerpts from the playwright's works. This way of presenting extracts from Pinter's dramatic production is completely in line with the company's principle of action of working mostly with documentary material researched directly or experienced in person by members of the company (two of their most famous plays, *Zone of Silence* and *Generation Jeans*, were born this way). Therefore, even though *Being Harold Pinter* is almost totally composed of extracts from writings by Pinter, the pattern of the play reflects the search for truth that underlies a documentary work of art and that Pinter strongly advocates in his Nobel lecture.

According to Pinter, our duty as citizens is “to define the *real* truth of our lives and our societies”; even more than a duty, it “is a crucial obligation [...] It is in fact mandatory” (2009, 300). After Pinter's Nobel lecture Carlos Fuentes stressed the importance of this conviction when he thanked him “for endorsing ‘the truth of the lie of art with a searing clarity that damns for ever the lies we are served as truth in politics’” (Billington 2007, 425).

If we look at the title, *Being Harold Pinter* shows the intention to challenge the audience to get into the playwright's creative process and to embody his view of the world, which is made of “a passionate humanist fervour and a despair at society's failings” (Billington 2007, 430). The parallel with the titles of Hollywood movies is a captivating echo that Khalezin liked but which just worked formally on a superficial level. For the Belarusian company, the playwright was an icon of the stubborn defence of the oppressed, of the dogged pursuit of truth, a symbol of the fight against the systematic brutality and the suppression of independent thought perpetrated by those in power, regardless of its being provocative and going against the mainstream. While the writings of Pinter are used to address abuses of power in Belarus – so as to voice the experience of being Belarusian – they are never distorted or altered but are shown under a reinvigorating new light. Therefore, if we are asked to play the never-ending game with Pinter's characters in that ambiguous transaction that is creation in art as he conceives it, we are also invited to impersonate the uncompromising observer of society, whose harsh criticism is meant to dissolve the tapestry of lies built by politicians with their political language for the maintenance of their power (Pinter's Nobel speech provides many examples from US foreign policy).

The first element that strikes us when we enter a theatre to view a performance of *Being Harold Pinter* is a huge close-up of Pinter's eyes in two separate pictures that hang on the back of the

stage and seem to suggest that the playwright himself is actually on the scene. We know we are going to see a kaleidoscopic collage of Pinter's plays, his Nobel speech, as well as interviews and letters from Belarusian dissidents, and we can guess that what gives structure to this body of texts is the name of the author itself. "The author's name is not just a proper name like the rest," as Michel Foucault noticed, "Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts" (1969, 107). It ensures the discourse a certain status and that it will be received in a certain way within a society and a culture. So, if texts define ontologically an author as such, the author's discourse also defines the texts. In this case the existence of a political playwright is demonstrated through a representation of his works. Harold Pinter and his works eventually coincide with his public speeches (and the Nobel lecture seems to sum them all up). Moreover, the name of the author is the fundamental criterion under which the integrity of his compound work is made clear.<sup>2</sup>

Under the wall on which the two pictures hang, there is a square framed by white duct tape. It approximately defines, as often happens in the productions of the Belarus Free Theatre, the boundaries of the acting space; possibly it is a reminiscence of the necessity for demarcating an acting area and connotes that place, since it is a recurrent visual sign in Scherban's productions. It is also reminiscent of the platform stage of Elizabethan theatre, projecting itself right into the audience; consequently, the actors are not trying for an illusionistic theatre, since they acknowledge the presence of the audience. When the lights dim, four actors dressed in black suits and white shirts enter and sit on four black and red chairs at the four corners of the white square. Four red apples lie on a black bench at the foot of the back wall. A black walking stick stands in the centre. Silence. A fifth actor enters from the left carrying in his hand, high above his head, a paper plane. After walking with it inside the square, he makes it land in his jacket's upper pocket. The same actor then starts speaking: "I went to get my plane on Monday and it was raining." It is a fragment from the interview Pinter gave to Michael Billington the same day he received the Nobel Prize. It is Pinter recalling the accident he had in Dublin after he had enjoyed a revival of some of his plays at the Gate Theatre to celebrate his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday: while getting out of the car at the airport to return to London, his stick slipped and he fell. A spray of red paint on the forehead of the actor marks the scar on Pinter's forehead after the accident. "One moment I was celebrating life greatly, the next moment I thought I was going to die." The set's design is strategically stark, rendered in black, white and red to underline the violent contrasting emotions at work. Violence is the leitmotif that links the fragments of the kaleidoscopic collage – from domestic, private violence to violence systematically perpetrated by the State. The link is not incidental.

After this prologue, the same actor tells us how relative is experience in life and how the exploration of reality through art does not attain the revelation of absolute truth. The author, the playwright, has no moral obligation to provide a resolution to his play. On stage, the search for the truth is for the audience and is therefore subjective. But in real life, as citizens, we must acknowledge

<sup>2</sup> According to Foucault, "The author provides the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social position, and the revelation of his basic design)" (1969, 111).

what is true and what is false. It is the beginning of Pinter's Nobel lecture. The actor speaks as a first person narrator, and addresses the audience directly. After several lines, the other actors start to interact with him and add their voices to the narration. In a dramaturgy where the omniscient author is banished, Pinter "uses the impossibility of verification to explore the contradictions of human behaviour and to assert the need for active resistance to social orthodoxy" (Billington 2007, 95). The multiple possibilities of different points of view are reflected in the fragmentation of the narration. The Nobel prize speech is a frame for extracts from Pinter's plays, actually those which are mentioned in the speech. Without interruption, in a continuous sequence of action, we shift from the speech to the first scene of *The Homecoming*. No change of set is necessary; it is enough for the actors to adjust their positions and just take a newspaper. Is it minimalism? Or poor theatre? I would say it is just striking and effective simplicity, a symbolic essential theatre, a word-theatre where you need only a few elements to create a highly evocative setting. The dialogue is harsh and the recurrent theme is ruthless brutality, but "There is also a feeling of the implicit current of menace, for which Pinter became a byword, assuming more literal forms" (Brantley 2011). Unlike in conventional interpretations, they enact the violence that stems from the father-son relationship with utter physicality. The same happens later on when from a private threatened violence in *The Homecoming*, *Old Times* and *Ashes to Ashes*, we move to the public, blatant political brutality in *The New World Order*, *One For the Road* and *Mountain Language*. The plays are arranged in a crescendo of cruelty that reflects a progressive overt engagement of Pinter in politics and civil campaigns during the last twenty-five years of his life.

Right from the beginning we are plunged into a world where violence is perpetrated by men, and this theme will be the leitmotif throughout the collage. *The Homecoming* opens with a violent family of men but, as often happens in Pinter, this violence hides a weakness. When Ruth comes into this unfriendly setting dominated by men, she will not conform to their wish to make her into a prostitute. She takes advantage of her position as object of desire and, with her strong personality and rationality, she exploits their libidinous impulses to eventually control and manipulate the male characters so that in the end the position of power is reversed. What is striking, however, in the conversation held by the actors is their strong will to subvert a brutal patriarchal authority.

We then undergo the cutting tension emanating from the concise, sharp dialogue excerpted from *Old Times* with which Pinter "demonstrated how the past and memory are exploitable as tools for gaining advantage" (Batty 2005, 52). The scene opens with a couple, Deeley and Kate, discussing Kate's old friend Anna. Their recollections of her are insecure and we don't know exactly if they are reinventions of the past in order to appropriate it. Later, Anna will gain dominance over Deeley following the same strategy. After this short scene, where pauses and silences still have a reason to be stressed to underline the increasingly interrogative tone of the conversation, we glide into the following part accompanied by the sound produced by wet fingers rubbing the rims of brandy glasses filled with water, actually "a high-pitched wail," which "turns an innocent-seeming object into the source of a sound that is disturbingly redolent of agony" (Marlowe 2008). It's the sound of the water under which *Ashes to Ashes* takes place, according to Pinter's visionary imagination: "*Ashes to Ashes*, on the other hand, seems to me to be taking place under water. A drowning woman, her hand reaching up through the waves, dropping

down out of sight, reaching for others, but finding nobody there.” Rebecca, the “drowning” female protagonist, is refracted into three actresses speaking in turn but also as a chorus. The dialogue still resonates with the echo of “the male desire to excavate and possess a woman’s past” (Billington 2007, 375), as heard before in *Old Times*, but this time the domineering attitude of the domestic, personal sphere evokes the political cruelty and arrogance of absolute State power. Being questioned by Devlin, Rebecca provides an image of a past (assumed?) sadistic lover. As the latter abused her, we discover he was also responsible for brutal acts of violence committed on his workers. His role closely resembles that of a Nazi official. Envious of the lover’s authority over Rebecca, Devlin tries to identify with him. Through the appropriation of her past, from which he had been excluded, he wants to control Rebecca’s body and mind. Nevertheless, as we have seen before, authority breeds insecurity, and so he fails to move her emotionally and loses the possibility to maintain his grip on her.

“The woman a lost figure in a drowning landscape, a woman unable to escape the doom that seemed to belong only to others;” this vivid image, yet again from Pinter’s Nobel speech, is reproduced in the show at the end of the long fragment from *Ashes to Ashes*: when Rebecca talks about babies being snatched from their mothers at railway stations and “by her imaginative transformation into a dispossessed mother, is translated from her own affectless innocence into a world of universal suffering” (Billington 2007, 382). Rebecca has eventually managed to reverse the initial hierarchy of power. At this point, the three actresses are engulfed in waves of transparent polyethylene, as four actors unroll over them a huge sheet of plastic and then start to shake it while the three of them go around in circles and press their hands to the sheet. At the end of the sequence all the actors are entrapped under that plastic skin; they stand close together, desperately trying to breathe. They say, “Objectivity is essential. The characters must be allowed to breathe their own air. The author cannot confine them.” It’s a striking image of the necessity for escaping the shell to tell a story to the world: Pinter’s stories but also their story. And suddenly they get rid of the sheet to reveal an actor, standing in his pants with a respirator on his face, centre stage. *The New World Order* begins. From now on there will not be time for pauses in the urgency of telling, showing and building a climax. These would sound artificial; these would just look like awkward attempts to appear “Pinteresque”. So the two interrogators start walking around their prisoner and sustain their dialogue by rhythmically clapping their hands while delivering their lines, until they mount two chairs at the side of the undressed and masked victim and zip and unzip their flies within close earshot of him. It’s farcical, it’s obscene and it is also threatening, as it reminds us of pictures from Abu Ghraib.

In *One For the Road*, the excerpt coming immediately afterwards, Nicolas, interpreted by an actress and seen as a religious power-figure – maybe an imam, as she enters she unrolls a prayer mat – with a markedly sensual bodily attitude, performs a weird ritual ceremony of purification (or initiation) when she runs a naked flame up and down the bare body of the male prisoner. Then, it is enough for another actor to sit on a chair taking on his lap two small lace shoes to be recognized as the young boy from the same play: he doesn’t act “being a boy”; he is just a frightened child. The paper plane, an apparently innocent object, is used to terrorize the child, and when it is driven against his face, it evokes the terror of bombings and eventually symbolises the child’s death.



Even if most of the time Pinter's verbal violence is suggested metaphorically on stage – as when a savage manifestation of brutality is represented by casually stamping on the red apples and smashing them to pulp – when it is rendered physically explicit, and apparently contradicts Pinter's indications, it seems, in Billington's words, that “these actors have earned the right” (2008) to do so. Eventually, the same actor playing the narrator in the beginning introduces us to the last excerpt, again quoting from the Nobel lecture: “*Mountain Language* lasts only 20 minutes, but it could go on for hour after hour, on and on and on.” This tragic repetition of the same pattern is witnessed by the letters from detained Belarusian political prisoners that the actors deliver in almost total darkness before the end of the excerpt. In this way, art and real life are brought together, and it is a highly emotional and disturbing moment. When the same actor takes the paper plane, sets it on fire and in total darkness takes it out of the scene, we know that we don't walk out the same way we went in.

### 3. Conclusion

Pinter first met the Belarus Free Theatre in Leeds in April 2007 but could not attend the performance of *Being Harold Pinter*. He saw it at the beginning of the following year at the Soho Theatre in London. His comment was as follows: “I'm proud that this tremendous and courageous troupe presented my texts in such a professional and astonishingly emotional way. They are bringing back the essential meaning of the theatre.” Antonia Fraser, in her poignant memoir of her life with Harold Pinter, remembers that “Of the Belarusian evening Harold said, ‘I felt proud of what I had written’ even though it was a collage which he doesn't normally like” (2010, 375-6). He evidently acknowledged how the Belarus Free Theatre had successfully managed to produce a work of art in line with his ideas.

In an enthusiastic review in the *Telegraph*, Dominic Cavendish remarked that, in *Being Harold Pinter*, “everything has been pared down to the simplest, most urgent point of expression” (2008). As a matter of fact, living in a constant critical situation, they always play as if they were playing for the last time. When in 2008, the Europe Theatre Prize awarded the Belarus Free Theatre the Special Mention, Jean-Claude Berutti – president of the Europe Theatre Convention – wrote in the motivations an apt definition that I would like to quote:

They are making art theatre, urgent theatre and survival theatre (which theatre ought in the end to be for all of us) in the middle of the action. For them, the practice of their art, in conditions bordering on the impossible, is as important as breathing. And we know that it is often at the price of their liberty that they enable their fellow-citizens to breathe with them. (2008, 42)

To maintain their liberty, they now live in exile. After the events of December 2010, Natalia, Nikolai, Vladimir and some of the actors have managed to find refuge in London, where at the moment they live and work.

On that night of September 2009 when I was at the Fortinbras studio theatre in Minsk, after Natalia introduced me to Zmister Bandarenka, I said that I didn't think I was particularly brave for being there; they were and are brave for their relentless fight for truth and for freedom and for the artistic activity that keeps alive the essence and the true meaning of *Being Harold Pinter*.

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