

Nikolai Khalezin and Natalia Koliada

Being Harold Pinter by the Belarus Free Theatre

In August 2005 Tom Stoppard arrived in Minsk by the invitation of the leaders of the Free Theatre, Natalia Koliada and Nikolai Khalezin. His five-day visit wasn't paraded in any way, since the Free Theatre had been banned in Belarus for political reasons, and any of its guests provoked close attention of the secret services. Stoppard held a master class for young Belarusian playwrights, met with artists and writers, visited the first day of classes of Humanitarian Lyceum prohibited by Belarusian authorities, and watched the debut production of *4.48 Psychosis* by Sarah Kane in Vladimir Scherban's production, then recently created by the Free Theatre. After the end of the performance, sitting in a tiny club on the outskirts of Minsk and talking with the leaders of the theatre, Stoppard said: «Have you ever read Pinter's plays?» Without waiting for a lengthy answer on what pieces of Pinter had been known in the former Soviet Union, he advised them: «Have a look at them, it seems to me that they're yours.» Stoppard's suggestion stood the theatre in good stead a year later, when the troupe began to stage one of their program performances – *Being Harold Pinter*.

The theatre needed to initiate the formation of its creative concept that year – a concept that singled out 'The Free Theatre' among the general expanse of European theatre companies. The basics of the theatre repertoire policy, focusing on the original literary material, were established in 2006 when, after addressing traditional drama material (Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* and Natalia Moshina's *The Techniques of Breathing in Vacuum*), two performances were staged consecutively,

based on works written specifically for the Free Theatre – *We. Bellywood*, based on a play by three young Belarusian writers and *Generation Jeans*, based on the play by Nikolai Khalezin. The first spur to the creation of the performance was Pinter’s Nobel speech, which had been criticized by the international press. It became a specific ‘guiding star’ for the authors of the show, which was able to lead them through the intricate route of Pinter’s theatrical search. Its fragments were so in tune with the ideas of the creators of the show, that director Vladimir Scherban thought that Pinter’s Nobel speech was no less important than his works. He believed its parts could easily be incorporated into the performance. Perhaps from that particular moment different plays and their fragments discovered the foundation from which the performance *Being Harold Pinter* could be born.

During the first week of September 2006 the director Vladimir Scherban, the theatre producer Natalia Koliada and the artistic director Nikolai Khalezin studied all translations of Pinter’s plays into Russian and Belarusian. Revision of the translated materials left a double impression – a number of plays were perfectly translated into Russian, though quality translations into the Belarusian language were missing, and some of Pinter’s works that received international acclaim weren’t translated at all. It proved to be a difficult case to read some of the plays – an edition of collected Pinter’s plays in English was absent in Belarusian bookshops; it was impossible to find them on the Internet as well. The problem arose, for example, with the play *Ashes to Ashes*, which Pinter mentioned in his Nobel speech. It’s worth mentioning that the authors of the project knew the text of the speech almost by heart by the time of the search for the play began. A lucky chance helped at a crucial moment to form the literary outline for the performance – a volume containing some of Pinter’s works was found in Moscow – its publication was timed to coincide with the playwright’s receiving the Nobel Prize. Fragments of the plays so necessary for the work were taken quickly from there. The title of the play appeared once Nikolai Khalezin started the ball rolling.

The analogy with the Hollywood films *Being John Malkovich* or *Being Stanley Kubrick* only worked there formally. The story of Pinter's life became the basis of the idea behind the title – a pretext, practically always having an iron clad justification, originality, sometimes on the verge of eccentricity, straightforwardness, often provoking an attack of public opinion on the playwright and an uncompromising point of view, bordering on a manic condition. At some point Pinter ceased to be merely a talented author, a personality, or just a warrior – he became a symbol. Thousands of authors around the world at least once in their lives thought about the issues: can I express my political point of view in the same way without any compromise?; can I decline the knight's title that is to be awarded by the Queen?; would I have the inner strength to speak out contrary to public opinion, as Harold Pinter did?

The theme of violence became the main idea of the dramaturgical compilation and its director Vladimir Scherban suggested it as the main theme of the performance. They decided to interweave the scenes from Pinter's plays with the Nobel speech fragments, which directly or indirectly addressed the topic of violence in various spheres of human life: from domestic in *The Homecoming*, to state violence against a person in the play *One for the Road* or *The New World Order*. *Being Harold Pinter* was the second play in the repertoire of the Free Theatre (after *Generation Jeans*), which was released within the frame of the campaign 'Stop Violence!' conducted by the theatre. The Free Theatre was the only troupe in the country, that, despite its underground status, strictly followed the principle of respect for the copyright against the background of a total theft of plays from the authors by state theatres, as a result of Belarusian self-isolation, which won it the title of the 'Last dictatorship in Europe' in the world press. Knowing the difficulties in communication between theatres and literary agents in Britain, they decided to call Tom Stoppard for assistance. The theatre patron and friend agreed to help without any hesitation. He met Pinter and brilliantly introduced a young Belarusian company, asking for permission to

perform of a number of his works for free. Pinter was unable to refuse his friend's offer, hardly being aware of what would become of the show with such a provocative and ambitious concept and a dramaturgical title. After that conversation, the theatre managers were able to communicate with Pinter directly, bypassing the 'agent's buffer'.

One problem arose immediately - when it turned out that the plays *The New World Order* and *Ashes to Ashes* didn't exist either in Russian translation or in an English version anywhere in the territory of Belarus. Pinter was unable to send a copy of the texts – he didn't have them as electronic files. Agents dragged the issue of sending files out and coordinating the conditions with Pinter; time was running out, and the premiere date had been under threat. One of their theatre friends, being at that time in Paris, came to their rescue: he bought a collection of Pinter's plays in a bookstore, scanned them page after page, and sent the files by e-mail. After that Oleg Shafranov could start to work on the translation of the plays *The New World Order* and *Ashes to Ashes*. Discussions between Natalia Koliada, Vladimir Scherban and Nikolai Khalezin about the literary filling of the performance took place during the whole period of pre-production. When, at the end of September, Vladimir began to rehearse parts of the show with the actors, the final version of the text didn't exist at all and some material still remained untranslated. In spite of that, the entire troupe had the feeling of the particular significance of the work to be done.

The performance *Being Harold Pinter* began to be prepared for production at a time when pressure on the theatre by the authorities had become especially powerful. Most of the actors who worked in public theatres were fired from their jobs and lost their livelihoods, some of the members of the troupe were dismissed from the university, some were reportedly arrested and beaten up and some were sent to jail. During the staging period of the performance, the director Vladimir Scherban was fired from the National Theatre of Drama, denied housing, and his productions were removed from the repertoire of all Belarusian theatres.

In mid-October the dramaturgical outline of the performance was shaped. The final version of the show was composed out of six of Pinter's plays and had been refined down to a single thread – the fragments of the playwright's Nobel speech. Scherban was able to mix seemingly disparate fragments and small plays in a line that began with a domestic conflict between a father and a son in the play *The Homecoming* and culminated with the apotheosis of violence in the play *Mountain Language*. Consistently, the structure of the performance was as follows: *The Homecoming*, *Old Times*, *Ashes to Ashes*, *The New World Order*, *One For The Road*, and *Mountain Language*. If the first three plays could be considered as material 'for all times', analyzing the nature of human relations along the lines 'father-son' or 'husband-wife', then the three dramaturgical fragments completing the performance were absolutely in tune with what was happening in Belarus at that time, so that Pinter's political drama began to shout at the top of its lungs. *The New World Order* was absolutely recognizable by Belarusians as a model to illustrate the relationship 'individual-State' during the last fifteen years. *One for the Road* reminded many of the methods of interrogation by members of the secret services – brutally cruel questionings through which at least ten thousand citizens had had to go in recent years. *Mountain Language* once again compelled them to reflect on the destruction of the Belarusian language by Lukashenko's regime. The question of the performance's finale remained open though. And then the material, a great part of which was collected in spring 2006 when presidential elections were held in Belarus, came in handy. Then, in March, about 1200 people protesting against the falsification of the election results were thrown into Belarusian prisons. Subsequently their letters from jail were massively replicated, and spread through the Internet and the Theatre developed plans to stage the performance based on those letters. Natalia Koliada and Nikolai Khalezin collected a huge amount of material, which was unclaimed at that time. When the production period of *Being Harold Pinter* was in full swing, Vladimir Scherban suggested: «Maybe we can incorporate some of this

material into the performance.» At first glance the idea seemed too radical, because it was already not even a deconstruction of Pinter's text, but an integration of a foreign fragment into the text – the letters of political prisoners from jail. The playwright Konstantin Steshik was called to assist in reviewing the entire array of letters and completed the job as soon as possible. At one point the authors of the show understood that they were going to stake their all on this performance. Pinter gave his consent to their use of the texts, but he could hardly have imagined what would happen to them next. He had always been anxiously concerned about the stage embodiment of his plays, but he couldn't even imagine that the Free Theatre would violate every possible taboo in one show, which the author was guarding so anxiously. Knowing that Pinter constantly banned directors' decisions to appoint an actress to the role of Nicholas in the play *One for the Road* Scherban took a risk in entrusting the role to Anna Solomyanskaya. He went for a cardinal reduction of the text, and even for a free rendezvous of fragments in one play. Realizing that their reputation and good relationships with such big names of the world drama such as Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard were at stake, especially when the latter had guaranteed for the Free Theatre, the authors of the show, armed only with a sense of humour, invigorated each other light-heartedly, using a phrase once delivered by Fidel Castro, 'history will justify us.' Excerpts from letters of Belarusian political prisoners had become the final chord, which gave a topical sound to the whole performance. History would justify the authors in reality, but this happened much later, while at that time the company was preparing for the premiere, organized for November 7th, 2006, the date of the 'October coup d'état' in Soviet Russia – the date which marked the 'red terror', that took lives of millions of people, including Belarusians. They had to rehearse the performance in private apartments, speaking in undertones without attracting the attention of the secret services. During the month of the production period, the company had to move into seven different flats – some of them were raided by the police while others had

to be abandoned after calls were made to the competent authorities by ‘alert’ neighbours who suspected ‘something wrong was going on.’ The premiere was held on the scheduled date, November 7th, in a country cottage, which the owners rented out for corporate parties. They decided to perform the first two shows in one evening - it was a gimmick, invented by Scherban in response to the theatrical legend that suggests that the ‘second performance is always a bad one’. Heated up after the first one, the actors performed the second show with the same emotional élan as in the premiere. The premiere was a success, with spectators coming to see the play in a rented bus. There seemed to be no trouble ahead and so they arranged another double show on November 8th. But the plan did not come off – a meeting of secret service officers with the owners of the cottage not only stopped the presentations of *Being Harold Pinter*, but suspended the rental of the cottage to other companies too. The same situation was constantly happening to the troupe – two clubs had lost their licenses, and many institutions where the theatre was able to play shows rushed to deny the company their collaboration after having received verbal warnings from law enforcement officers. The problem was also that the Free Theatre was an unregistered entity and had no right to be engaged in commercial activities. And because of that the company had to rent a space to show their performances, paying from two hundred to four hundred USA dollars for it, and invited viewers to see them for free. Friends and acquaintances – fans of the theatre – helped with them out financially. A mechanism for inviting viewers to the show on its own became an act that provoked a potential audience into taking resolute action. Because of the constant harassment by the authorities, the managers of the theatre developed their own system for warning the public. The announcement of a performance was posted on a blog network after which viewers had to find the phone number of one of the managers. That number appeared on the blog or the theatre website from time to time, after which viewers passed it on to each other. When a play date was announced, a viewer called a manager and put his or her

name on a list. The day before the show a staff member of the theatre called the spectators and told them the time and place of the gathering. The spectators then gathered in a specified place, from where they were escorted by small groups to the house where the performance would take place. That complex system became unique to the formation of the theatre's own audience - young educated people, mostly from sixteen to forty five years old. After some months the 'waiting list' consisted not of hundreds but thousands of people willing to go even a hundred miles out of the city to see the performances of the Free Theatre.

The first version of the play *Being Harold Pinter* lasted about one hour forty minutes, but later it was reduced to one hour fifteen minutes, with the unnecessary pauses and delays being cut out. Vladimir Scherban waived the famous Pinter's pauses that had already become a traditional pattern, inviting the audience to evaluate another Pinter – a dynamic, biting, or if you prefer 'on the edge' – an emotionally open and uncompromising Pinter.

Before its first appearance in England *Being Harold Pinter* had been shown outside of Belarus' borders only once – in the Moscow Center named after Vsevolod Meyerhold, where, at the beginning of its activities, the Free Theatre had been invited annually with its season premiere performances. The critics took it well, but abandoned any deep analysis of the play, as apparently, they hadn't decided on any criteria for how to approach the material. Harold Pinter was a very rare guest on the Russian stage, and all the productions of his plays for the last dozen years could be counted on the fingers of one hand. The first serious test the performance underwent was on April 13th, 2007, when the Belarusian troupe arrived in Leeds in order to perform it as part of the celebration of Harold Pinter on the occasion of his being awarded an honorary University doctorate. The theatre was obliged for the invitation to Leeds to Alex Chisholm, a director of the West Yorkshire Playhouse, after she told the organizers about the Belarusian performance. The university theatre playground was lucky for the Free Theatre, and the 'test' was

successfully passed. Before the beginning of the performance the Belarusian troupe was presented by Tom Stoppard, who arrived in Leeds to support the Free Theatre and his long-time friend Harold Pinter. Michael Billington, a patriarch of the British critics, dedicated an enthusiastic review to it on his blog, and another critic, Alfred Hickling, honoured it with five stars in *The Guardian*: «As a final masterstroke, the group incorporates transcripts from Belarusian political prisoners that are almost indivisible from the dramatized scenes. It's an extraordinary event that not only illustrates Pinter's career-long denunciation of political terror, but also proves that a poor, under-financed theatre can often deliver the richest dramatic experience.»¹

The Free Theatre troupe members met Pinter at a public discussion held after the performance. Pinter hadn't been able to see the show because he felt very ill, and decided to confine himself to a meeting with the troupe after the performance to pay his respects. He only managed to see the performance a year later – during a tour of the Belarusian company in London's Soho Theatre.

The debate, held in the theatre hall of the University of Leeds, was quite a strange one. It began with a dialogue that was worthy of Pinter's plays. Pinter entered the hall full of people where the troupe members of the Free Theatre were sitting on the stage in the chairs. The audience greeted him with applause and Pinter took a seat in the first row. A pause filled the air. He pointed with his cane at an apple that had been crushed and abandoned after the play and left lying on the proscenium, and then he asked: «What is it?» «An apple,» Nikolai Khalezin answered. «Good,» was the playwright comment. There was a pause, after which the entire hall erupted with laughter. In that dialogue consisting of three short phrases you could easily discern Pinter's manner of constructing dialogue when characters were saying a simple phrase, which consisted of a multi-layered 'pie' with a deep meaning that has been gradually tested and

¹ Alfred Hickling, 'Being Harold Pinter', *The Guardian*, April 16th, 2007.

absorbed by the audience. After showing the performance, the Dean of the Theatre and Faculty Professor Mark Taylor Batty said that he was «proud that the premier of the performance in England took place in Workshop Theatre.»

Then it was hard to imagine that they would be given another opportunity to make the performance for Pinter, but it did eventually happen in 2008. By that time the performance had already been shown in a dozen countries, and everywhere it received good reviews. However, 2007 was one of the most difficult for the troupe – repression became more severe, and the performances were held in Belarus under a veil of absolute secrecy. The authorities learned about the system of alerts for the audience through the blogs network and tracked every new post about performances. A boiling point in the relationship between the theatre and the authorities occurred on August 22nd, when the premieres of two new projects were to take place – *11 Vests* staged by French director Christian Benedetti, and a work-in-progress performance *Legends of the Childhood* staged by Vladimir Scherban. The premieres were not fated to be held on that day – just before the beginning of the first show, a house which was used for the performance was cordoned off by secret service officers, and members of the troupe along with all fifty spectators who were there at that time were arrested. Tom Stoppard was the first one who was able to contact the leaders of the theatre, who had been locked up in a police station. The next morning a letter from Harold Pinter arrived by e-mail. It was short and distinct: «I am furious. Count on any support on my behalf. Pinter.» Members of the troupe knew the meaning of those words: if something happened to them, nothing would stop Pinter – neither the threat of losing his reputation, nor the most difficult physical conditions, nor even public opinion.

By that time the Free Theatre and Pinter had already established not just the relationship between a theatre and a playwright but something more. And coming on tour to London's Soho Theatre in February 2008 became one of the most important moments in the development of the

Belarusian theatrical group. The Free Theatre brought two performances for London tour – *Being Harold Pinter* staged by Vladimir Scherban and *Generation Jeans*, staged by Nikolai Khalezin. The London audience had quickly recognized the performances of the troupe – at the first shows the hall was filled to 60-70% of its capacity but after the first five days there were only full houses. Critics welcomed the performances with rave reviews of which we quote here a few excerpts: «We should all be proud of the honour this production pays to Pinter: it equals the Nobel prize»²; «This is world-class theatre, built on the guts of raw experience»³; «They bring art and life together by switching between extracts from Pinter's Mountain Language, in which the mountain people's native tongue is forbidden, so silencing them, and excerpts of testimonies from Belarusian political prisoners. Drama gives these prisoners an international voice, quietly demonstrating the vital political role of theatre in action»⁴; «Beneath a photograph of Pinter's own watchful eyes, the cast of seven, dressed in grey suits and directed by Vladimir Scherban, create a nightmarish kaleidoscope of darkness, light and blood-red. [...] Their delivery is packed with punchy aggression, and the menace of Pinter's writing becomes uncompromisingly overt»⁵; «If Pinter's verbal violence is rendered physically explicit, these actors have earned that right»⁶; «It's a rewarding experience. The play *Being Harold Pinter* knocked me out.»⁷

A meeting of Pinter and the performance of *Being Harold Pinter* can truly be considered a historic one. On February 20th, 2008 at the Soho

² John Peter, 'Being Harold Pinter, Soho Theatre', *The Sunday Times*, February 24th, 2008.

³ Dominic Cavendish, 'Being Harold Pinter: brilliant glimpses into the abyss', *Daily Telegraph*, February 18th, 2008.

⁴ Sarah Hemming, 'Being Harold Pinter, Soho Theatre', *The Financial Times*, February 17th, 2008.

⁵ Sam Marlowe, 'Being Harold Pinter at Soho Theatre', *The Times*, February 20th, 2008.

⁶ Michael Billington, 'Being Harold Pinter', *The Guardian*, February 18th, 2008.

⁷ Stephanie Merrit, 'Tom Stoppard to the rescue. Why the writer is backing freedom in Belarus', *The Observer*, February 10th, 2008.

Theatre in London, the stars of the British theatre gathered together: playwrights Tom Stoppard and Mark Ravenhill, actors Diana Quick, Tobias Mendez, Henry Goodman, Richard Wilson, Jocelyn Gee, Andrea Riseborough, Kim Cattrall and Alan Rickman. Pinter, accompanied by his wife Lady Antonia Fraser, entered the hall behind everybody, making his first public appearance in three months. Mark Ravenhill delivered the opening remarks, and then handed the floor to Pinter. He was, as always, laconic, giving a three-minute speech, the meaning of which was concentrated in the phrase, delivered in the finale: «I'm proud that this tremendous and courageous troupe presented my texts in such a professional and astonishingly emotional way. They're bringing back the essential meaning of the theatre.»

It is difficult to tell what the playwright was thinking about, looking at the stage, from which his own eyes, only significantly larger than the originals, were looking at him – the eyes that were the center of the stage production. Could it be he wished to correct something in the text of his Nobel Prize speech, which was delivered by Oleg Sidorchik, who was playing the role of Pinter himself? What was the playwright's wife Antonia Fraser thinking about, with tears running down her cheeks for almost the entire show?

The climax of the performance was the scene in which the actors delivered the texts of letters of Belarusian political prisoners from jail. In the original performance that scene took place in almost total darkness, and the actors had only been highlighted by their personal lanterns while saying the text. That evening the director Vladimir Scherban left the light on, changing the usual score of the performance. Approaching the scene with the letters, the actors of 'The Free Theatre' moved away from the proscenium and took seats in the front row of the audience. The stars of British theatre took their place on the stage, getting up from the first row of chairs. They read the letters dressed in black and white clothes, repeating the color scheme of the performance. This simple task of acting was not actually as simple as it seemed: the chilly lines of the letters,

describing the events that were taking place in today's Belarus made some of the actors cry, and some people forgot for a moment that it was happening on the stage of the Soho Theatre. After the performance, while talking to other actors, Alan Rickman said: «That performance was my most vivid theatrical experience.» The 2008 final annual issue of the newspaper *The Guardian* recognized the February tour of the Free Theatre as 'London's theatrical event of the season', giving the whole page to Mark Ravenhill's article on the Belarusian theatre company.

The leaders of the theatre received their last letter from Pinter in November, just before their next trip to London. It was a response to their request for an interview for a documentary film *The Last / It Lasts*, which was shooting in full swing. «It would be nice to meet you at my home, because we have quite a lot to discuss. I hope that my health will allow it...» His health sadly didn't allow it. A few months later, the leaders of the theatre received a letter from Lady Antonia Fraser, who still hadn't recovered from the death of her husband. She wrote that until that time she hadn't been able to talk about Harold calmly, and then she recalled the performance they had attended together. There was one phrase in the letter which the leaders of the theatre called 'a loan that will take us a long time to pay back' – «I know how much you've meant for Harold during the last years of his life.»

After the death of the playwright the Free Theatre went on a great Australian tour – the performance *Being Harold Pinter* was shown twenty two times in January 2009 at the Sydney Festival. All performances took place with overcrowded audiences and the theatre dedicated that tour to the memory of their friend – Harold Pinter.