

Korniag theatre : Not what we think we ought to see from Belarus

Description

If one often thinks that the independent Belarusian theater is just a metaphor criticizing politics, the interview with the Korniag theater shows that an alternative is possible.

Many foreign audiences assume all Belarusian artists make political work, often inserting political discourses into pieces that aim to explore other subjects with different metaphors. Below is an interview with members of an independent Belarusian theater company that you probably haven't heard of yet, that hopes to create performances that have nothing to do with politics. If Korniag Theatre is not interested in discussing Lukashenka or «*the last dictatorship in Europe*», like we expect, then what is their work about?



On revolutionaries and rock stars

I first learned about the reality of Belarus through theater. A few years ago, I read a *New York Times* about the Belarus Free Theatre in Minsk, an independent theater company founded in 2005 by Nicolai Khalezin and Natalia Koliada. While placed in the newspaper's Arts section, the essay was much more than a review of *Numbers*, an excerpt from the group's *Zone of Silence* trilogy. Substantial ink was devoted to the living and working conditions for this Belarusian theater company, «*the only unregistered—and therefore independent – dramatic collective in this country of 10 million on the edge of Europe*»; and in Belarus, *unregistered* means *illegal*[1].

In addition to describing scenes from *Numbers*, the column discussed the secret, non-theatrical spaces this underground group has been forced to perform in to avoid the KGB arresting them or their audiences, a common occurrence. The article also detailed the personal costs to Belarus Free Theatre members—the loss of work for them and their families—in order to continue making «*relevant theater*», in the words of Khalezin, which «*deals with issues that people are used to keeping silent about*»[2].

Beyond their local notoriety, Belarus Free Theatre has simultaneously garnered extensive support internationally by various theatre professionals and institutions, including Ian McKellan, Tom Stoppard, and the late Harold Pinter. For the world media, Khalezin and Koliada's personal experiences instantly interweave with the country's politics, which is inseparably linked to their theatrical art. In the foreign imagination, they play the dual role of theater revolutionary and rock star.

In December 2010 peaceful protests against the President's re-election ended in violence and incarceration for thousands in Minsk's Independence Square, including Koliada and Khalezin. Since then, Belarus Free Theatre has been in exile. Granted political asylum in Britain in 2011, the group continues to make new political theater—face to face with actors in London, and directing plays with their colleagues in Minsk via Skype.

Theirs is a moving tale of resistance, survival, and resourcefulness; of how art can give «power to the powerless», as Václav Havel described it. Yet it also colors how we see any art that originates from Belarus, suggesting that all Belarusian art is –or should be– political.

Of course, like any country, Belarus' artistic activity is complex. I have written elsewhere about Belarusian visual artists, both in and outside of the country, whose work explores other subject matter beyond politics in an attempt to grasp a more complete picture of Belarus' diverse contemporary scene[3]. But what about theatre and the performing arts – are there other independent groups besides Belarus Free Theatre working today that we can examine? Is their work similar or different?

«They still do not have internet?»

«We do what we like, things which are interesting and relevant from our point of view. State theatres in Belarus have plans which all of them must fulfill; and, in my opinion, their work has nothing to do with the art. Sometimes I think that maybe they still do not have internet?»

Korniag theatre is an independent group serving as the artistic vehicle for director Evgenij Korniag, born in Minsk and a graduate of the Belarusian Academy of Arts. His final thesis project, *Not a Dance* (2007), introduced the aesthetic which has since become associated with the Theatre: a plastic theatre where *«the actor's body is the main means of expression. This is the language the director uses to speak to the audience, a language audiences in every country will understand.»*

Producer/Manager Marina Dashuk adds that Korniag *«took a vacant niche of experimentation with the human body»* in Belarus, where the plasticity of the actor became *«the main facilitator and mediator between the action onstage and the viewers.»* She emphasizes that the group *«always work with dramatic actors only who play the meanings of their body.»*

After graduating from the Academy, Korniag received more education in stage directing from the Meyerhold Center in Moscow. Returning to Minsk, he initially planned to work independently within the country's borders, and with only Belarusian actors. He quickly found others who shared his passion *«to change something in the sphere of Belarusian theater where experiment, the search for new forms, and relevance»* were not being offered.

The new group soon discovered, however, that financial resources were scarce to produce the distinctive theatrical work they envisioned independently in Belarus. Private and experimental venues do not exist in the country; the stages are state-run, as thus subject to strict regulation of content. The necessary funds to pay for production-related costs were so limited as to be essentially non-existent. This constant lack of money meant that creating a permanent acting troupe was impossible, they said, as any money earned from ticket sales went to pay for basic production costs.

«All of these difficulties», says Korniag Administrator and PR Manager Alexandra Grigorovich, *«distract us from being able to be creative. It feels like you're moving nowhere.»*

Dashuk adds that their actors joke that they work for free in Korniag Theatre, and that *«we took their passports. The first part of the sentence is not a joke»*, she adds. *«Each participant of Korniag Theatre must have an official permanent job, because this is their journey through self-expression, creativity and experimentation. We do not earn money – everybody invests their personal time and earnings to create this theater.»*

These intense economic factors drove Korniag Theatre to alter its original mission and seek opportunities abroad. Currently, the group works between Poland and Belarus: Marina and Alexandra primarily live and work in Bialystok, Evgenij travels between there and Minsk, and their actors drive four hours or more each way from the Belarusian capital.

The Belarusian company hopes to find ways to stay in Poland more often, as they report more opportunities here. In contrast to Belarus' predominant naturalistic theatrical culture, in neighboring Poland they appreciate its physical theatre traditions, with audiences much more receptive to Korniag's plastic performance style.

Politicizing Plasticity

Belarus Free Theatre frequently infuses their performances with highly political themes, from documentary-like plays based on real events (like *Discover Love* or *Zone of Silence*), or shaping pre-existing texts into cohesive performances (such as Vladimir Shcherban's adaptation *Being Harold Pinter* taken from plays, speeches, and essays written by the late Nobel Laureate). By contrast, Korniag Theatre emphasizes their plastic stage art's apoliticism.

Dashuk and Grigorovich feel that Belarusian audiences and critics expect their work to be political, no matter what. This expectation continues when showing their work abroad, contextualizing their work solely as dissident political theater, and replacing the onstage metaphors with references to real-life politics from the Belarusian space.

Sometimes this can be frustrating or even bizarre. When performing their absurdist parable about fear *Play Number 7* at an international festival in 2011, the presenters marketed the work as being by *«Korniag Theatre—denied the ability to perform in their home country of Belarus.»* This was done without the company's permission, and in fact, the piece itself has never been banned in Belarus. In 2013's *Latent Men*, a piece about sexuality and human relationships, international audiences often remarked on how powerfully the images of the piece evoked the 1986 disaster at Chernobyl—an interpretation completely unintended or articulated by the artists.

In both instances, perhaps unconsciously, it is as if Western eyes were fetishizing Belarusian culture. Blind to what is actually happening onstage with their unique plastic performance style, too often international audiences politicize Korniag Theatre's work as is commonly done with all independent art emerging from Belarus today. It is narrowly assumed that all Belarusian art, including theater, revolves around politics, Lukashenka, and *«the last dictatorship in Europe»*. By subscribing to such a belief, we are continually missing the nuances of the complete picture of what is happening in the contemporary Belarusian art scene today, instead only seeing what we think we ought to see.

«...Not what is needed in Belarus right now»

«The process of creating the play is a mystery to me I still have not unravelled,» Korniag says. *«Every time I do a new performance – I do not know how to do it. Every time I try to remember what I did for the last play, but it doesn't work.»*

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Today, Grigorovich and Dashuk continue to apply for public and private grants to secure the Theatre a permanent stage in Poland. This August the group premiered *From the Other Side* in ?ód?, Korniag's first collaboration with Chorea Theatre (Poland), a work that marks a shift towards subject matter which is, in fact, political.

Evgenij describes the piece as being «*created during the conflict between Ukraine and Russia; and of course, these events affected the performance.*» Centered on a wedding, the work incorporates traditional wedding songs from Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine. «*My goal was to put characters in a situation where they must decide on which side to go, whom to choose: father or mother, son or daughter*», he explains. «*To put characters in a situation with an incredibly difficult choice that is not under the power of a normal person.*»

While hoping to tour the work in his home country, the group's director remains restless. «*I believe that now contemporary modern theatre is absolutely not interesting,*» he says, «*and is not what is needed in Belarus now.*»

References :

[1] [Stern, David L., «In Belarus, Theater as Activism», *New York Times*, September 22nd 2009.](#)

[2] [Ibid.](#)

[3] [McCall, Bredan, «Interviews: Art, lies, and truth in contemporary Belarus», in Anaïs Marin & Horia-Victor Lefter, «Portrait du Bélarus», *Regard sur l'Est*, June 18th 2014.](#)

Picture : Photo courtesy Korniag Theatre

[Translation in French](#)

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date créée

01/11/2014

Champs de Méta

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