

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Being Harold Pinter

Belarus Free Theatre  
Soho Theatre  
(2008)

*"The history of Germany is a copy of the history of Belarus. Germany was raised from its ruins thanks to a firm authority German order evolved over the centuries and under Hitler it attained its peak."*

Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko

Belarus means "White Russia". It is the last strong bastion of the old Soviet regime. Belarus Free Theatre gives a flavour of the darkest reality in a country gripped by the government's iron fist.

The director, Vladimir Scherban, with seven actors, explores the political and social reality in the country through a series of scenes extracted from different Pinter plays. The language used is Russian with clear surtitles. Extracts from Pinter's Nobel lecture join the scenes like a wreath of torture and brutality.

The production moves from domestic random violence scenes extorted from *Homecoming* and *Ashes to Ashes* to state violence from Pinter's late political plays.

Pinter said in his Nobel speech, "Political theatre presents an entirely different set of problems. Objectivity is essential." This production attempts to use Pinter's characters to voice an "uninhibited range of perspectives" on torture and violence as experienced by Belarus' dissidents.

The political violence scenes are drawn from *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language*, which, Pinter commented is "brutal, short and ugly", and *The New World Order*. Although these plays centre on different international conflicts, Scherban imports the themes into Belarus' political reality, trotting out some harrowing images of bloody torture reminding the audience that those executing the acts of violence on others get some fun out of it and that torturers become easily bored and therefore search of new ways of inflicting pain on their victims.

There are also vivid scenes exposing collusion between State and Church. The Church henchman, in a form of a priest, strips the victim of his clothes and dignity subjecting him to a real fire, eerily evoking memories of the sinister conduct of the inquisition.

Pinter's polemical political plays translated interestingly into a reality he may have not envisaged. The Free Belarus Theatre found the fitting engine for their cry for freedom translating the English text into their own language and then communicating it via acting, mime, music and the lines over-titled in English, as set out by the horse's mouth.

Brutality is powerfully demonstrated through mime, acting, music and censor.

The overall impact is poignant. A raw nerve awakens awareness of a brutal reality of a dictatorship not too far from our doorstep which is rather disconcerting.

The company, founded in 2005 by Nicholai Khalezin and managed by his attractive and articulate wife Natalia Koliada, has impressive support outside Belarus. Tom Stoppard, Vaclav Havel, the former President of Czech Republic, Arthur Kopit US playwright are just but a few who provide support that goes beyond lip service. In Belarus, as one might expect, the company does not exist officially, yet they manage to rehearse clandestinely and put on a stimulating and thought provoking performance.

*Ray Brown [reviewed](#) this production at the West Yorkshire Playhouse*

**Reviewer:** [Rivka Jacobson](#)