

Political Theatre in NYC

La Mama Presents-- *Being Harold Pinter*

Being Harold Pinter, performed by the Belarus Free Theatre (at La Mama) is passionate and heart wrenching. The 75-minute piece is a startling, unsettling commentary on the power struggles which exist amongst Pinter's characters in comparison to the inherent powerlessness of the Belarusian people. The show is completely spoken in Russian with subtitles, but the violence that occurs in Belarus is apparent through the strategically bare set design, rendered exclusively in black, white and red. The language is for the most part a collage of Pinter's works specifically his Nobel Prize Speech. NY Times review states: "Several forms of evolution are happening here at once. There is, for starters, Pinter's description of his increasingly direct political engagement as a dramatist. But paralleling this account is the sense of the Belarus troupe itself coming into being, finding Pinter's voice with ever-greater visceral immediacy." Combining Pinter's words with the struggle of the Belrusian people prove to be an effective and thought-provoking piece of political theatre.

I came into this performance being completely ignorant about the oppression going on in Belarus. In fact, I didn't even know where Belarus was located on a map. With the help of Google, I found out it was a country in northeastern Europe, surrounded by Russia, Ukraine, and Poland. The country of 10 million people is led by Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Lukashenka is looked upon as somewhat of a villain for having extended his initial presidential term and almost assuredly rigging two more consecutive elections where he was found the victor. He is oppressive, violent, and intolerant to those who challenge his policies.

The goal of this performance was to educate Americans about the violence and oppression going on in Belarus through the lens of popular playwright, Harold Pinter. Was it successful? Absolutely. It made me want to learn more about the suffering of these people and the tyranny of the government. I do believe, however, that it would have been more powerful if the actors were to debrief a bit with the audience at the end. I felt I had numerous unanswered questions and was left hungry for more. I think that is a sign of good theatre though, right? It left me thinking and wanting to learn more.

As the audience was exiting at the end of the show, I stayed back to speak to the manager of the performance space. I told him the play was extremely passionate and although it was in Russian, the message was clear. I wanted to learn more. He told me that these actors were thrown in jail in Belarus for simply *being actors*. They were arrested for this type of political theatre and for speaking their minds against the government. One of the stage managers had been in jail up until New Year's Eve, and the actors essentially had to be smuggled out of their country in backs of trucks. They escaped to the US and performed in NYC in January, then in

Chicago and now back in NYC. He said that they would do anything to not return to Belarus; they fear for their lives if they do in fact go back.

I walked home not only thinking of the oppression of the Belarusian people, but specifically of being an artist without any freedom of speech. The bio's in the program proudly display how almost everyone in the company has been arrested, or beaten, or jailed, or all three, for the sake of their underground art. As an artist myself, I know how important freedom of expression is and how we would be lost without it. I can't even imagine being a part of a country where you are persecuted because of theatre! The passion that these artists have to tell their story is part of what makes this show, and political theatre in general, so successful.

There were many strong and violent images in the play that evoked horrid feelings within the audience. Images of rape and sexuality were prevalent in this performance. Sounds of forced sex, fists strangling women, sex in exchange for freedom were all powerful and disturbing themes. A particularly memorable scene was when a woman was discussing a recent sexual assault. She pulled up her nightgown and her underwear smeared in blood silenced the audience.

One of the messages of this performance is the ignorance and apathy of the Belarusian people. Because they are not willing to fight back, the president and his people will continue to oppress. They are only allowed to speak the language of the government and are constantly persecuted for speaking out against Lukashenka. This theme of oppression and being unfairly trapped in their country was most interestingly portrayed using a sheet of transparent plastic as the cast members thrust and writhed beneath it. The true meaning of this sheet is unclear, but it is safe to say it becomes a shivery metaphor for being trapped and exploited in a violent place.

The ending of the play proved to be the most powerful of all the graphic scenes. The lights are off, and we see only through a flashlight that the words being spoken are no longer Pinter's but words of actual Belarusian political prisoners. The real life words are so poignant as prisoners compare their conditions to the brutality of the Holocaust! These statements are extremely violent, telling of prison rape and torture including an attack on a child and a naked man with his genitals lit on fire.

One question that remains in my mind is the objectivity of political theatre. This piece was not a balanced presentation of the politics of Belarus. Lukashenko nor his supporters were never given a chance to defend themselves or offer their points of view. Frankly, why should they have this opportunity? Should political theatre show different opinions, even those of the aggressor?

I believe wholeheartedly in theatre for social change and am confident that this play led the audience to go home and reflect on the violence and oppression in Belarus. Not only is this interesting and effective to watch, but even in the classroom, political theatre and forum theatre can be used to stimulate change with

a variety of issues. For example, when teaching 6th grade, I used some exercises in forum theatre to have students explore issues of bullying. They brainstormed different causes, effects, and scenarios revolving around bullying and created scenes. The audience (the other classmates) were able to jump into the scene in place of the victim to experiment ways to stimulate a different outcome. The students responded to this extremely well, and the effects of this lesson were seen even outside of the classroom. The students began to respect each other more and understood what it was like to be in the victim's shoes.

This performance and my experience in the classroom cause me to reflect heavily on political theatre in general and the impact it can have on a society. These actors in the Belarus Free Theatre company risk their lives each day that they perform. They are speaking out against the leader of the country and would rather speak their minds and risk persecution than remain quiet. Can theatre cause a social change? I think it can put pressure on society to begin thinking about an issue in a different way. Political theatre can give persecuted people a voice and a chance to be heard. According to Jan Cohen-Cruz, "efficacy depends on a favorable constellation of unstable elements: people already engaged with specific issues, aesthetic strategies that are compelling to desired audiences, strong alliances with political or community organizations, sufficient material support, and synchronicity with the energy of the times." This play was able to do just that.

Even though I was not familiar with the Belarusian politics, or Pinter's works for that matter, I had no trouble grasping what was important to these artists. This play, much like political theatre I have seen in the past, was effective and gut wrenching. Theatre for social change encourages actors to speak out and tell truths about their oppression. These gifted, brave actors from Belarus surely deserve the freedom to make their art and say what they need to say. With each New Yorker that they make aware of their situation, they are successful in their fight toward social change.

Works Cited

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