



Theatre of repres

Belarus is Europe's dark corner, a place where elections are rigged and opponents of the government are imprisoned and tortured. Dissent is brutally oppressed but human rights defenders are fighting back using the power of theatre. **Katrin Schmoll** writes about the work of the Belarus Free Theatre

It's a sunny morning in June and, in London, commuters are confronted with a disturbing image: a row of seemingly lifeless bodies wrapped in white body bags, lying on a pavement in the city centre, close to the Houses of Parliament.

The startling line of bagged bodies represents the disappeared people of Belarus. The missing include Vladislav Kovalyov and Dmitry Konovalov, two young men executed last March for their alleged involvement in a bombing that shook the Belarusian capital Minsk in April 2011.

The two executed men were convicted in November 2011. Kovalyov consistently protested his innocence while campaigners said later the trial was unfair.

The body bag protest in London was dedicated to Kovalyov and Konovalov, and to many others in Belarus who've been kidnapped, innocently locked up, tortured and executed over the last 20 years.

The actors inside the bags were trying to draw people's attention to dreadful events taking place only a couple of hours away from London by plane. Their protest was a reminder for politicians that there remains one brutal dictatorship in Europe. The protest by underground group Belarus Free Theatre may seem macabre, but it's certainly not as grim as the reality of life in its members' home country.

Belarus is Europe's dark corner. The former Soviet republic is a state where the death penalty is still enforced, where opponents of the government get locked up before voting and where election results are allegedly falsified. Officially, Belarus has been a presidential republic since 1991 and independent since the dissolution of the USSR. Since 1994, the state has been governed by Aljaksandr Lukaschenka, who rules the country in an authoritarian fashion akin to Stalin and who implemented a new rule in 2006, via referendum, that eliminated term limits to allow him to remain in power.

"For Europeans, it's unthinkable what's going on in our country. You get on the plane and you land in another reality," says 39-year-old Natalia Kaliada, who's been unable to return to her home country since her escape some three years ago.

She believes the Minsk bombing was organised by the authorities in order to distract people and that Kovalyov and Konovalov were made scapegoats. "There was no proof – they randomly chose these two young guys," she says.

During protests after Lukaschenka's controversial election victory in 2010 Kaliada was also arrested but released after 20 hours. Despite being in prison less than one day, she says she was threatened with rape and murder by the guards.

With the support of American friends, her family was smuggled out of the country in 2012 and since then Kaliada, her husband Nicolai Khalezin and their two daughters have been living as political refugees in the UK. In their homeland, they've been declared public enemies. "We were lucky that we could escape," says Natalia, "A lot of our friends have been arrested – some are still in prison."

Andrej Sannikov, who ran against Lukaschenka at the 2010 elections, and his wife, journalist Iryna Chalip, were also arrested during protests against the outcome of the election. Sannikov has allegedly suffered severe abuse by guards during his stay in prison. The couple have been told their four-year-old child has been kidnapped and will be "put in an orphanage", a threat to ensure their co-operation, claims Kaliada, who is good friends with the family. Sannikov was sentenced to five years in prison but released after

"We want to prove that we are stronger than the dictator - and we are."

serving one and a half. His wife was sentenced to two years on probation.

Despite being unable to return to their homeland, Kaliada and

Khalezin continue their work with Belarus Free Theatre. Via the internet, they educate young actors and organise secret performances in Minsk. "We want to prove that we are stronger than the dictator – and we are," Kaliada says.

Theatre director Vladimir Shcherban, who joined the duo shortly after they founded the group, is also an exile from Belarus. Living in London and using Skype, he's directed entire screenplays to political opponents of the government.

Actors who participate in

Issues of torture and repression are tackled in Trash Cuisine. Photo: Free Belarus Theatre



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underground performances in Belarus have all lost their jobs, plus any chance to work again for a theatre, as all cultural institutions are state-controlled.

All performances by Belarus Free Theatre are free in their home country but the price actors and audiences may ultimately pay could be very high.

"It's complicated and dangerous," Kaliada explains. "Our existence itself is our biggest achievement – it's more like a miracle."

It is no less astonishing that art continues to exist in Belarus and that people dare to attend plays, given that teenagers are forced to secretly meet in cellars to rehearse with bands because of restrictions. The state is always watching the population. The internet is censored, so youngsters take enormous risks even when blogging. Watching performances by Belarus Free Theatre is fraught with danger.

"It works more or less like this: you get a number of a person from someone you know, you call that number and then you'll eventually get a call back and you're being told the time and the venue only shortly beforehand," says Kaliada.

"Of course, everything is top secret. All participants are aware of the risk they are taking when attending or taking part in one of the plays. We always tell the people to bring their IDs, so the identification works faster, in case they get arrested."

For many people in Belarus, attending banned performances is worth the risk and actors know that without the support of their fellow citizens there would be no chance of change in their country.

Kaliada says: "There is only one independent theatre in Belarus. All the other cultural institutions are controlled by the state. Belarus is totally isolated, and it's almost impossible to get independent





Free Belarus Now's protest near Parliament last month. Photo: Simon Annand

information. It's our major goal to give people access to information – especially information related to the arts.”

Belarus Free Theatre performs plays by both Belarusian and international playwrights and also distributes free audio plays over the internet.

The group has been supported by celebrities such as Jude Law, Ian McKellen, Sienna Miller and Kevin Spacey, and has performed at the Public Theatre in New York, the Young Queen Vic and Shakespeare's Globe in London, and the Sydney Festival – despite the constraints of a tiny budget.

The first performance under Shcherban's direction was *4.48 Psychosis* by the British playwright Sarah Kane, which deals with depression and suicide – two of many taboo issues in authoritarian Belarus.

Their current piece, *Trash Cuisine*, deals with the death penalty in Belarus and other countries, and will form part of Edinburgh's Fringe festival in August.

Trash Cuisine is the first play entirely performed in English.

Natalia and Nicolai educate actors and organise secret performances in Minsk



Director Kaliada.
Photo: Jane Hobson

Kaliada and Khalezin have been working on the piece for four years. During research, they travelled to Asia and Africa to visit inmates on death row and they also talked to executioners.

Many other projects are at the planning stage, including plays on transgender and environmental crimes.

The biggest taboo, however, is Belarus itself. “A journalist once asked me why I think that the media reports so little about what's happening in Belarus,” recalls Kaliada. “I replied to her: ‘I should be the one who's asking you that.’ That's indeed the biggest question I have for journalists: ‘Why is Belarus not in the media?’”

She suspects it is easier for European politicians to focus on the problems of remote countries as opposed to talking about what's happening in Belarus, on their doorstep. Pressure from the public and the EU governments, she says, is the missing factor to help bring about change in Belarus.

Kaliada fears she will never be able to return to her home country. “At the moment it's unthinkable,”

BELARUS: THE CHARGE SHEET

Since his election in July 1994, President Aljaksandr Lukaschenka has steadily consolidated his power through authoritarian action. Government restrictions on freedom of speech, the press, peaceful assembly and religion have been strongly criticised by human rights defenders. Examples include the harassment of the Union of Poles in Belarus (which represents ethnic Poles in the region) and the abduction, unlawful detainment and torture of American attorney Emanuel Zeltser and his assistant Vladlena Funk during the US-Belarus hostage crisis of 2008-2009.

Religious, political and journalistic activity is tightly controlled. Other alleged human rights violations include the digging-up of a Jewish cemetery to build a sports stadium.

Belarus is the last country in Europe not to have abandoned the death penalty. Bodies of those executed are not returned to families. Cases of political kidnapping and murder are not investigated, and today there are many innocent prisoners in Belarusian jails.

“The Belarusian government continues to severely curtail freedoms of association, assembly and expression, and the right to fair trial,” says Human Rights Watch.

Belarus is subject to sanctions imposed by the US and the European Union for human rights violations.

In Belarus, execution is performed by a shot to the back of the head. After Vladisla Kovalyov was killed his mother said she received a note from the authorities saying the death sentence on her son had been carried out. That was all. No return of the body, no burial. European governments said they were dismayed by the sentence and described the trial as deeply flawed.

she says, but she remains optimistic about the future of her country. “People in Belarus are ready for changes. One of our most important tasks is to educate the young generation, because they are the ones who will bring transformation when the dictatorship is over.” ■

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