

Pinter Gets Belarussian Treatment

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Oleg Sidorchik, one of the seven cast members in "Being Harold Pinter." **Joan Marcus**

NEW YORK — Watching "Being Harold Pinter" requires courage, perseverance and commitment. Performing it takes much, much more.

The actors and creators of the Belarus Free Theatre production are putting themselves in considerable danger simply by putting on the play, a menacing, stripped-down indictment of totalitarianism.

The troupe uses a mashup of selections from six Pinter works — "Mountain Language," "One for the Road," "The Homecoming," "Old Times," "Ashes to Ashes" and "The New World Order" — together with quotes from the playwright's acceptance speech for the 2005 Nobel Prize in literature and transcribed statements from Belarussian political prisoners.

Their play, which was seen in New York at the Public Theater's Under the Radar festival in January and then at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, has returned to New York and opened Monday at La MaMa, part of three works by the troupe being shown in repertory along with

"Zone of Silence" and "Discover Love."

Their encore is not necessarily about the strength of their work as it is about the potential danger the company faces at home, the very topic they explore on stage. Members of the troupe had to sneak out of Belarus to perform "Being Harold Pinter" in America and say they face harassment or worse from the former Soviet Republic's secret police. Their wandering is both our benefit and our chance to support art that speaks to power.

The seven-member cast — Nikolai Khalezin, Pavel Gorodnitsky, Yana Rusakevich, Oleg Sidorchik, Irana Yaroshevich, Denis Tarasenko and Marina Yurevich — play multiple characters on a stage with just a few props and four chairs.

Though performed in Russian and Belarussian with an English translation appearing on a screen above the action, this brave examination of state brutality does not get lost in linguistic pretzels. Watching torture has a way of focusing the mind, particularly if it is done by people who face that possibility at home.

The funny thing is that it is Pinter who is in many ways the beneficiary of the attention from the Belarus Free Theatre, not the other way around. The playwright's work, which often blended absurdism and realism, gains new meaning in Vladimir Shcherban's adaptation and direction.

A character in Pinter's "Ashes to Ashes" fantasizing about an erotic affair she had with a sadist gets reinterpreted anew when set against the backdrop of state torture. In a section from "Mountain Language," set in a prison controlled by unnamed guards in an unnamed country, dogs intimidate and bite prisoners, echoing Abu Ghraib.

The troupe has gained the support of many artists, including Jude Law and Tom Stoppard. Pinter himself was a champion of theirs before his death, allowing the company permission to perform his plays anywhere without paying him royalties.

Toward the latter part of "Being Harold Pinter," real stories of torture and mistreatment from prisoners in Belarus are told, and these are the most horrific moments of the play. Pinter's nightmares have become reality.

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