

Escaped From Belarus, Actors Raise Voices

"Being artists, we have a hunger to produce and perform again, but we also have a duty to speak for our country." **NATALIA KOLYADA**, Belarus Free Theater



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHAD BATKA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Members of the persecuted Belarus Free Theater after their arrival in New York: clockwise from top left, Natalia Kolyada, Nikolai Khalezin, Vladimir Shcherban and Artiom Zhelezniak.

By **LARRY ROHTER**

For most performers invited to this year's Under the Radar festival of international alternative theater, which begins Wednesday, getting to New York is simply a matter of boarding a plane. But for the Belarus Free Theater, a politically engaged troupe used to living and working on the edge in an authoritarian state, the long trip from Minsk was a little more complicated.

On Dec. 19 and 20, as that city, the capital of Belarus, erupted in protests against a presidential election that international observers said was rigged, two members of the troupe were arrested. The rest went underground, and for a while it appeared that the future of the company itself, not just its appearance in New York, was in jeopardy.

"We've truly been under the radar, in hiding in a real detective story," Natalia Kolyada, a

co-founder of the company, said in an interview at her hotel in New York on Monday, the day after her arrival. "We've had to leave the country in small groups, and not in an official fashion, let's put it that way." Members of the group, including the director, Vladimir Shcherban, were concealed in trucks and cars, changing vehicles at regular intervals to throw government security forces off their trails.

The Belarus Free Theater is scheduled to

perform its play "Being Harold Pinter" at La MaMa in the East Village, beginning Wednesday and continuing through Jan. 16, when the festival, produced by the Public Theater, closes.

"Being Harold Pinter" mixes transcribed statements by Belarussian political prisoners with writings by Pinter, the Nobel Prize-winning playwright and a supporter of the troupe. Previously performed in London, it has been

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praised by The Sunday Times of London, which said, "drama doesn't come more urgently political," and by Tom Stoppard, a friend who has visited the company in Belarus.

The notion of artists struggling against an oppressive state is always attractive and inspiring, especially for those democratic societies where artists are not subjected to such intimidation. But theater professionals also praise the Belarus Free Theater for consistently producing work that is moving and powerful, and not agitprop.

"From the samples of their work that I've seen, it's clear they really have theater chops," said Fritzie Brown, executive director of CEC ArtsLink, a New York group that finances international cultural programs. "They have a marvelous corps of actors, very good writing, and Vladimir Shcherban is a great director who can bring out the spark that makes actors transform themselves. They are a company prepared to die for their work, and that really comes across."

Since 1994 Belarus, once part of the Soviet Union, has been ruled by Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, in what Condoleezza Rice, as secretary of state, once called "the last remaining true dictatorship in the heart of Europe." Radio, television, film and the press are all heavily controlled, and opponents of the regime have been known simply to disappear, which raises the question of how a dissident theater troupe could even exist.

Ms. Kolyada, 37, and her husband, Nikolai Khalezin, 46, founded the Belarus Free Theater in 2005, almost as an act of desperation. The nonprofit art gallery Mr. Khalezin once ran had been forced to fold under official pressure, and though he subsequently found work as a journalist, the three opposition newspapers that hired him were shut down, one after another.



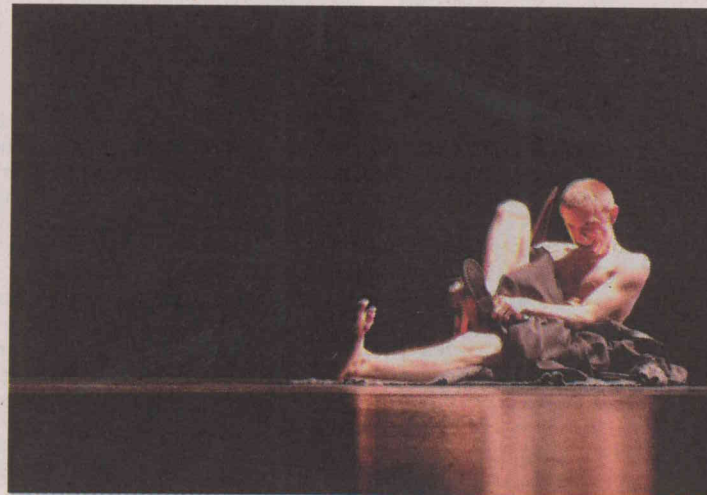
CHAD BATKA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Natalia Kolyada and Nikolai Khalezin of Belarus Free Theater at their New York hotel on Monday.

"By 2004, I was so tired of politics that I began writing plays," he said. In the meantime, Ms. Kolyada, whose academic background is in history and business, had drawn government scrutiny because of her involvement in efforts to rid Belarus of nuclear missiles, rocket fuel and other weaponry left over from the Soviet era.

"Theater was the only medium not under complete state control, because ever since Soviet times the theater has been self-censored, from inside," explained Mr. Shcherban, who has directed most of the troupe's productions. "That's how we managed to surprise the K.G.B."

But that initial advantage evaporated quickly. The Ministry of Culture soon classified Mr. Khalezin's plays, including "Generation Jeans," a meditation on imprisonment for nonconformity that was performed at Under the Radar in 2008, as "not recommended for production," and also



ALEKSANDR PASKANNONI

A scene from "Being Harold Pinter" by Belarus Free Theater.

refused to allow the troupe to incorporate or register, which made it ineligible for official or even private donations.

Simultaneously, the state security apparatus undertook a cam-

paign of intimidation and repression against cast members and even ordinary theatergoers. Some actors were fired from their day jobs at universities or other state entities, while others

have been pressured through threats to their relatives; Ms. Kolyada said that her father, a well-known acting coach, lost work because of her activities.

Actors who belong to the official system "come all the time to watch us perform and tell us how much they would love to perform with us," said Mr. Shcherban, 35. "But then they add that if they do that, they won't be able to eat or buy an apartment."

Catherine Coray, a theater professor at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, recalled a trip she made to Belarus in 2009 to teach a workshop at what she described as "an underground school for people who want to be playwrights and actors," sponsored by the company. She saw several of the Belarus Free Theater's performances and witnessed the elaborate procedures that have been adopted to thwart official pressures on the audience.

"They do their pieces in this tiny studio, with no publicity whatsoever, for an audience that is reached through text messages," she recalled. "And that audience never comes directly to the theater. They are met at another location and escorted to the theater by a cast member. When you come, you are advised to bring your passport, because you never know when the police are going to show up and haul everyone off to jail."

Sometimes, Ms. Kolyada said, "we simply perform in the woods."

Much of this harassment comes courtesy of the Belarusian K.G.B., which Mr. Khalezin mordantly describes as "the most honest organization in the world." Since "their nature and methods did not change" in the transition from the collapse of the Soviet Union two decades ago to the emergence of an independent Belarus, he explained, "they saw no need to change their name."

Last month most of the troupe managed to escape the post-election repression led by the K.G.B., but one of the group's managers,

Artiom Zhelezniak, was less fortunate. He was arrested, he said, in a predawn raid on an apartment where he was translating accounts of the crackdown into English for posting on opposition Web sites, and was jailed until New Year's Eve, often without food, water, a toilet or sleep.

Appearing still startled at being in New York rather than in jail, Mr. Zhelezniak, 25, described his trial as "a three minute affair" with no lawyer present, only a judge and a prosecutor. Speaking of his jailers, he said: "They joked among themselves about taking us out to the forest and shooting us, as in Nazi times. They wanted us to know they could do anything they want."

On Thursday, after the opening

A troupe forced, at home, to perform in clandestine theaters.

of "Being Harold Pinter," Ms. Kolyada, who has the best command of English among troupe members, plans to go to Washington. There she is to meet with Congressional staff members on Capitol Hill and State Department officials to discuss the worsening situation in Belarus.

Just last Friday, Mr. Lukashenko, who has railed against what he calls "mindless democracy," ordered the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which monitors elections and human rights, to close its office in Minsk.

"Being artists, we have a hunger to produce and perform again, but we also have a duty to speak for our country," Ms. Kolyada said. "As moral people, we need to scream, and we appeal to artists, governments and people of good will all over the world to join us and scream on our behalf."