

Elyssa Livergant (2016) 'Belarus Free Theatre, Labour Mobility, and the Cultural Politics of the Border', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 26:2, 241-257, DOI: 10.1080/10486801.2016.1143818

In what follows I want to stage the hope for working across, beyond, or without borders, a sentiment promoted by the existence of Belarus Free Theatre, alongside issues of labour mobility in the theatre and performance sector and the wider world of work.¹ The concept of 'the border' indexes not only a commitment to working across, for example, nations, cultures, and disciplines; it also indicates theatre workers' commitment to working at the limits and with the unknown. What I am proposing here is that theatre and performance's critical interest in border discourses might benefit from also thinking about the labour conditions of the theatre and performance industry itself. This requires a slight shift in perspective – one which foregrounds the theatre and performance worker as a professional border crosser. However, this is not primarily because the actor moves between the self and the character – traversing one's own material and the material of 'others'.² More importantly, this definition reflects the way that contemporary theatre and performance workers and companies are, for the most part, obliged throughout their working lives to continually build new relationships and find new places, opportunities, and occasions for work. The rhetoric of 'the border' is indicative of attempts to manage the industrial activities of theatre and performance workers. The border also legally enacts what kind of labour is permissible where and by whom. The spatial politics that underpin the labour of the theatre and performance worker practising alternative configurations of self and community points to a more complex relationship to border crossing than may have, in the past, appeared to be the case.

The following document comprises two linked sections that open-up a space for reflecting on the company and its relationship to the cultural politics of theatre work, labour mobility, and the border. They also serve to broadly mark Belarus Free Theatre's activities over the last decade. Both sections stem from my visit to Minsk in 2009 to work with students enrolled in

¹ The author would like to thank the editors, peer reviewers and Belarus Free Theatre for their helpful comments in developing the work that follows.

² Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento, *Crossing Cultural Borders Through the Actor's Work: Foreign Bodies of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 7.

the company's Fortinbras studio. The first traces the relationship between the European movement of the company and its relation to labour mobility. The issue of theatre makers, among other visiting artists, coming to perform in the United Kingdom (UK) has been contentious since the introduction of the Home Office's points-based visa system in 2008. The introduction in 2012 of the Permitted Paid Engagement visa (PPE) has not resolved matters. Equally, labour's mobility between sites of employment within the neoliberal post-Fordist economies of the global North is particularly complex for theatre and performance workers. In this section, my critical reflection moves from Belarus Free Theatre to borders and labour to the UK cultural industries and back to the company. I consider the problems associated with Belarus Free Theatre's visibility and mobility, both in their own country and internationally. I am concerned with the ways the company throws into relief the ambiguity of 'the border' discourse in theatre and performance in relation to the labour conditions of theatre and performance workers in the UK and more broadly. The second section comprises an interview I conducted in Minsk in 2009 with the company's co-founders Natalia Kaliada and Nicolai Khalezin, who are married and serve as joint artistic directors.³ The interview offers a unique opportunity for the reader to gain insight into their thoughts on Belarus Free Theatre's relationship to both politics and cultural production prior to four core members of the company fleeing from Belarus between 2010 and 2011.

Belarus Free Theatre and the Border

The year 2015 marked the tenth anniversary of Belarus Free Theatre (BFT). In November 2015, a month after the Belarusian presidential elections reinstated Alexander Lukashenko to his fifth consecutive term, the company hosted a two-week festival in London called 'Staging a Revolution'.⁴ Taking place in secret locations and at the Young Vic, it featured ten of the company's shows alongside discussions with thinkers and activists about contemporary political issues. The festival's name is central to the conception of Belarus Free Theatre and associated with subject positions that gesture towards resistance or liberation and celebrate

³ I attended the company's Fourth Annual International Contest of Modern Drama Festival in Minsk, offering a workshop alongside theatre makers from Zurich and presenting a performance. I was approached via the Belarus Free Theatre by a UK documentary filmmaker to use my visit as a framing device for making a short film about the company. This aired on Al Jazeera's Witness programme in 2009. See

<<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/witness/2009/08/200982071812727410.html>> [accessed 2 August 2015]. Numerous international news reporters also attended the festival in Minsk that year.

⁴ *Staging a Revolution* is also the name of a 2010 documentary on the company by Guerrilla Pictures. The film can be found at <<https://vimeo.com/72092099>> [accessed 7 July 2015].

attachments to theatre and performance that are bound up with ideas of authenticity and social justice.

In January 2011, immediately following a post-election crackdown on demonstrators in post-communist Belarus, after the fourth consecutive re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko in December 2010, Belarus Free Theatre struggled to get to New York. They had been invited to perform their show *Being Harold Pinter* at LaMaMa for The Public Theatre's Under the Radar Festival. In a statement filmed upon arriving for the festival, Kaliada explained:

Some of us arrived yesterday in New York, changing cars, changing names and flying absolutely from another country because it was not possible to make it from our own country [. . .]. [T]wo other groups are arriving today and it was the first time in the history of our theatre when our theatre cannot make it together from our own country to [another] country. We are split into three groups and travelling from another country [. . .] to perform, just to perform.⁵

Kaliada's description of the company's covert and anxious journey from Belarus to New York is remarkable for two reasons. The first is the way their narrative of moving across countries in order to work is characterized by secrecy, separation, disguise, and fear. This account resonates with those forced to migrate, often at great personal risk, to seek a better life in the global North for themselves and their families. The second is the astonishment Kaliada communicates about her company's ordeal in getting to another country to 'perform, just to perform'. This remark dramatizes performance as something that should escape the logic of state controls. It also resonates with an idea that working in theatre and performance is both burdened and blessed with the potential for hope attached to an 'authentic' form of labour.

⁵ See 'A Statement from Belarus Free Theater Co-Founder Natalia Koliada', YouTube, 4 January 2011 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jg3erf2BFDE&feature=player_embedded#!> [accessed 2 August 2015]. As well as performing in New York, Kaliada travelled to Washington where she met with Hillary Clinton, then US Secretary of State. The USA and Europe placed sanctions on Lukashenko and other Belarusian officials following state violence against protesters after the elections.

For Belarus Free Theatre, moving across geographical borders to work is particular. Unlike the weekly deportation of women, men, and children from Europe – driven in vans across Europe’s eastern borders to be handed back to Ukrainian and Belarusian border guards and police – Belarus Free Theatre’s challenge is tied less to getting into other countries in the global North and more to the fear of being unable to get out of their own country.⁶ The company has access to network capital: their restricted mobility is internationally recognized, and has helped them to acquire the cultural and symbolic capital associated with a transnational class of cultural global elites.⁷ This affords them the capacity to move, appear, enter, and remain inside some of the most securitized borders in the world. Belarus Free Theatre’s heightened situation marks a particular blend of concerns that cut across classes of migrant workers. Their situation indexes both a broader polarization of migrant workers in capitalist urban centres and throws into relief the varied positions that the mobile theatre and performance worker has within circuits of global exchange.

Belarus Free Theatre was conceived in 2005 to provide alternatives to the international narrative of political dictatorship associated with President Lukashenko’s now 21-year regime.⁸ As Kaliada explains,

our first statement was our desire to say what we want, to whom we want, whenever and wherever we want by means of theatre. We really wanted to ignore Lukashenko himself in order not to raise his profile. It was about staging an aesthetic conflict between people and the regime.⁹

The company debuted in Minsk with a production of Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis*, directed by Vladimir Shcherban. An original partner in the company, Shcherban brought with him a

⁶ For an account of immigration officers and border police in the UK and Europe see Matthew Carr, *Fortress Europe: Dispatches from a Gated Community* (London: Hurst & Company, 2012), pp. 133–53.

⁷ John Urry defines network capital as comprised of the following elements: array of appropriate documents, others at a distance to offer invitations, movement capacities, location for free information and contact points, mobile communication devices, secure meeting places, access to transport, time, and resources to coordinate. See John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp. 197–98.

⁸ ‘Rice Calls for Change in Belarus’, BBC News, 21 April 2005 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4467299.stm>> [accessed 2 August 2015]; Nelly Bekus, *Struggle over Identity: The Official and the Alternative ‘Belarusianness’* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), p. 23.

⁹ Natalia Kaliada in email correspondence with the author, 4 June 2014.

group of actors, and paved the way for a permanent ensemble that continues to be an important aspect of the company to this day.¹⁰ The company have devised productions that directly critique human rights abuses in their country as well as producing performances of classic plays, like Chekhov's *The Seagull*, that have been branded anti-government by Belarusian state powers. The company's second major touring production *Being Harold Pinter* (Image 1) was seen extensively outside of Belarus, making stops in major urban centres and international festivals in the West. Performed in both Russian and Belarusian, the company's production spliced texts from plays by Harold Pinter with excerpts from the playwright's 2005 Nobel Peace Prize speech and verbatim testimony from political prisoners in Belarus. It became the company's calling card, garnering critical acclaim and propelling their story of dissent and freedom through theatre onto the pages of various national media outlets.¹¹

The company's aesthetic mixes a documentary approach with those associated with 'in-yer-face' theatre, no doubt influenced by techniques and approaches introduced by UK artists into the post-Soviet theatre scene in the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹² Their approach is also grounded in major Eastern European theatrical traditions, influenced by, among others, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Jerzy Grotowski.¹³ The political playwriting of Václav Havel, Harold Pinter, and Tom Stoppard has also strongly influenced the company's artistic practice. Their performances depict narratives repressed by Belarusian state theatre and media and their audiences in Minsk, while small, witness the realities of poverty, racism, gender, and sexuality that are marginalized, ignored, or silenced in contemporary Belarus. Their aesthetic practice maintains a fidelity to the power of simple visual metaphors and the physicality and plasticity of the performing body. As Keren Zaiontz points out in her detailed reading of the company and its nomadism through its 2012 Globe to Globe production of *King Lear*, company members use their bodies and their own stories to depict the violence that underpins

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The show had its premiere at the Workshop Theatre in Leeds, UK in April 2007, as part of the event *Artist and Citizen: 50 Years of Performing Pinter*.

¹² For an account of the influence of the Royal Court, verbatim techniques, and 'in-yer-face' theatre on post-Soviet Russian theatre in the late 1990s and early 2000s see Mark Lipovetsky and Birgit Beumers, 'Reality Performance: Documentary Trends in Post-Soviet Russian Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18.3 (2008), 293–306 (pp. 293–97).

¹³ Kaliada, correspondence with the author, 4 June 2014.

contemporary society in Belarus.¹⁴ The staging of opposition to their country's political regime is what has garnered the company international attention as an alternative voice for Belarus. Within the wider international media the company has generated as much, if not more, coverage for the country than the government has.¹⁵

Central to grasping the company's domestic context is the fervent struggle over the identity of Belarus since 1989, where official and opposition discourses have sought to establish a narrative for the state. Newly sovereign, and with a developing economy and role as a transit state for energy supplies, Belarus is a geographical, cultural, and economic borderland between Russia and Europe. Lukashenko and his authorities adhere to a national narrative of early twentieth century Soviet modernization and maintain close financial and political ties with Russia, tight reigns on the media, and interpret opposition to the government as transgressive and seditious. Dominating through fraudulent election processes, censorship, intimidation, and harsh penalties for those who fail to toe the regime's line, under Lukashenko's reign leading opposition figures, human rights activists, and journalists, among others, have been imprisoned, tortured, and 'disappeared'. The country's opposition has sought to form a new basis for collective self-determination that embraces Belarus as a post-colonial formation within a framework of Western capitalism, combining demands for renewed national self-determination with ideas of political liberty.¹⁶ This is the narrative that Belarus Free Theatre is most closely aligned with. Co-founders Kaliada and Khalezin (Khalezin is also a co-founder of Charter 97, a declaration for democracy in Belarus and a pro-human rights news site) were drawn to theatre because they viewed it as a relatively uncensored domain for publically addressing the abuse of human rights perpetrated by the Belarusian government. While members of the ensemble have lost their jobs in state theatres as a result of working with the company, Belarus Free Theatre's ability to generate high

¹⁴ Keren Zainotz, 'The Right to the Theatre: Belarus Free Theatre's King Lear', in *Shakespeare Beyond English: A Global Experiment*, ed. by Susan Bennett and Christie Carson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 195–207 (p. 202). Zainotz's analysis of the political situation in Belarus and its impact on a globalized iteration of the company's nationhood has offered much to my reading here.

¹⁵ This is a somewhat unscientific estimation. In terms of Google hits, searching for Belarus Free Theatre on a computer in London produces 1,550,000 hits, while Lukashenkoproducts 531,000 [7 August 2015].

¹⁶ As Frederick Hertz noted in 1951, 'the demand for national self-determination is usually represented as one for liberty. Nevertheless national self-determination is by no means identical with political liberty. It does not necessarily imply a democratic regime, but merely freedom from foreign interference.' Cited in Bekus, *Struggle over Identity*, p. 37.

profile media, celebrity, and political interest in their work has ensured, to some degree, their safety and the safety of those in Belarus associated with the company. However, following mass arrests after Lukashenko's 2010 election victory the company, some of whom had been taken into custody, left Belarus for their own safety. In 2011 four core members of the company – co-founders Kaliada and Khalezin, director Vladimir Scherben, and actor Oleg Sidorchik were granted political asylum in the UK and the following year the company achieved UK charitable status, basing their offices at the Young Vic Theatre, their 'home' in London.¹⁷

Much of the critical and promotional language around Belarus Free Theatre's activities has focused on their relationship to borders. Be it their own commitment to exploring the borders of society, culture, and the individual in their performances; the challenges faced getting across the Belarusian border; the company's work across geographical borders; and Belarus Free Theatre as exemplary of the importance for art to be free to travel across borders. For theatre and performance scholars, the concept of the border has served as an important trope to reflect on the relationship between performance, identity, and encounter. Critics have tended, broadly, to approach this in the following ways: as foregrounding the liminal and hybrid, as theatrical and as a logic of movement.

When foregrounding the liminal or hybrid, discourses have tended to celebrate transgression or reflected on a destabilizing 'in-betweenness' that is tied to cross-cultural exchange.¹⁸ Configuring borders as in-between or contact zones has, in the past, enabled theatre and performance practice to appear as an expression of progressive potentialities because identities and practices can be redefined. Accounts of the border as a theatrical space, specifically by theatre scholar Sophie Nield, highlight the extent the border relies on

¹⁷ For details on the 2010 elections see Benjamin Bidder, 'Disputed Elections in Belarus: Europe's Last Dictator Shows Violent Side', Spiegel Online International, 20 December 2010 <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/disputed-elections-in-belarus-europe-s-last-dictatorship-shows-violent-side-a-735633.html> [accessed 2 August 2015]. More recently the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe declared the elections in Belarus were not free or impartial. See 'OSCE Says Belarus Election Not Impartial or Competitive', Reuters, 24 September 2012 <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/09/24/ukbelarus-election-osce-idUKBRE88N0F420120924>> [accessed 2 August 2015].

¹⁸ See John Martin, *The Intercultural Performance Handbook* (London: Routledge, 2003); *Trans-Global Readings: Crossing Theatrical Boundaries*, ed. by Caridad Svich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Conversations Across Borders: A Performance Artist Converses with Theorists, Curators, Activists and Fellow Artists*, ed. by Laura Levin (London: Seagull Books, 2011).

narratives or encounters in order to appear.¹⁹ In mobility accounts, the border negotiates the tensions between a space of place and a space of flows. In these accounts the dramaturgy of the border, as performance scholars Ramón Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young point out, is defined by the securitized logic of the geo-politics of neoliberal capitalism.²⁰ These accounts, which no doubt have some overlap, mobilize the border as trope to stage utopic and dystopic models of society and make visible forms of cultural production.

My approach to the border develops on the above accounts by drawing attention to the ways the discourse of ‘the border’ in theatre and performance reinforces commitments to labour in the theatre and performance sector. ‘The border’ in theatre and performance stands in for modelling private, public, and institutional alternatives through theatre’s mode of production. It serves to amplify theatre and performance’s social character while obscuring the economic register of civic co-presence.

Performance studies analysis of ‘the border’ is complemented and extended by Belarus Free Theatre. The company is at home in a neoliberal transnational theatre industry that depends on the international circulation of cultural products and labour. As a product of the cross-cultural zone border discourse, the company offer their aesthetic practice as a meeting point for those inside and outside Belarus. The narrative of artistic censorship and now political exile that accompanies the company and their work, and features heavily in the majority of press coverage on Belarus Free Theatre, theatricalizes a border between dictatorship and democracy, between ‘East’ and ‘West’. This narrative ensures pride of place for ‘one of the bravest theatre companies in the world’ in a global capitalist market that seeks to capitalize on ‘unique’ cultural goods and labour that consolidate cultural norms.²¹

¹⁹ Sophie Nield, ‘On the Border as Theatrical Space: Appearance, Dis-Location and the Production of the Refugee’, in *Contemporary Theatres in Europe: A Critical Companion*, ed. by Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 61–72.

²⁰ Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young, ‘Introduction: Border Moves’, in *Performance in the Borderlands*, ed. by Rivera-Servera and Young (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1–16 (p. 7).

²¹ Jonathan May, ‘LIFT Commission New Show by Belarus Free Theatre’, *London International Festival Theatre*, 19 November 2013 <http://www.liftfestival.com/blog_entry/2358/news/news/lift_commission_new_show_by_belarus_free_theatre_for_lift_2014> [accessed 2 August 2015].

Belarus Free Theatre's apparent ease of transit across theatre festivals in the 'West' as Belarus's representative cultural product, rests on the company's appeal as border crossers in a transnational festival market. The appeal of Belarus Free Theatre to audiences is the promise that being co-present with the company, whether in Minsk or in other countries, pays off in ways not possible in other theatre shows precisely because of the conditions under which they labour. The company is able to trade on their uniqueness and authenticity and this is, in a sense, what grants the company collective symbolic capital in the theatre industry.²² For those with a stake in the utopian productivity of theatre and performance, being co-present with Belarus Free Theatre may provide them with psychic benefits about the kind of work theatre can do. The company is able to bridge across various audience markets because their productions fulfil two key criteria for success in the international festival circuit identified by theatre scholar Ric Knowles: their existence is about theatre itself (i.e. that freedom can be achieved through theatre) and their visibility promotes liberal beliefs about the human being and its freedom.²³

The company's self-proclaimed skill at being, at least in Eastern Europe, 'the best scanners of the world theatrical festival situation' is significant for understanding the kind of performance they are enacting on the world stage.²⁴ The international festival circuit, as Knowles has convincingly argued, is a marketplace for the global exchange of cultural capital:

festivals increasingly function as National showplaces, in which the 'Culture' of nations, with financial support from national governments and within the context of various diplomatic interventions from foreign offices and embassies, is on display for a world and audience that is thereby constructed as an international market for cultural and other 'industries'.²⁵

²² Carole McGinn, 'The Bravest Theatre in the World', *Time Out*, 1 December 2010 <<http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/the-bravest-theatre-in-the-world>> [accessed 2 August 2015]; Trash Cuisine Show Information, Young Vic, <http://www.youngvic.org/whats-on/trash-cuisine> [accessed 2 August 2015].

²³ Ric Knowles, 'The Edinburgh Festival and Fringe: Lessons for Canada', *Canadian Theatre Review*, 102 (2000), 88–96 (pp. 91–92).

²⁴ Their statement appears in the interview with the company, below, in the second half of this document.

²⁵ Knowles, 'The Edinburgh Festival and Fringe', p. 89.

Throughout their existence, Belarus Free Theatre's authority to stage a version of their nation has primarily relied on the 'West's' interventions: for funding, audiences, media attention, and producing support. Although the company aligns itself with the Belarusian people its affinities link the company to broader-based geo-political concerns about freedom and human rights. Belarus Free Theatre are acutely aware of the necessity to increase their mark of distinction as world-class cultural professionals so as to better ground their claims to sanctioned and supported mobility. And it is not always successful. It is a complicated situation, as Kaliada explains, '[o]ur people are denied visas as any others and this often jeopardizes our work but we solve the problem by other means and by replacing people on an emergency basis'.²⁶

Much of the company's activities have been geared towards building up their cultural and social capital – from the hosting of international artists in Minsk to the garnering of support from high profile artistic figures including Tom Stoppard, Kevin Spacey, and Jude Law and organizations committed to freedom of expression like Index on Censorship and English PEN. As a protected and remunerated class of professionals their ability to move and work across borders requires that the company present their persecution and oppression through appeals to artistic excellence, which allows them access to sanction and support in Europe and the wider global North.²⁷

Labour Mobility and Commitments to Work

In 2006 the European Commission (EC) celebrated the European Year of Workers' Mobility, which emphasized the merits of interstate labour mobility 'as an instrument for more effectively anticipating the effects of economic restructuring'.²⁸ Attention to strengthening its internal labour market stemmed from the European Union's (EU) desire to retain its competitive business advantage by 'strengthening the impact of geographical and occupational mobility in the forward management of skills and the adaptability of European

²⁶ Kaliada, correspondence with the author, 4 June 2014.

²⁷ The core members of the company do not have the ability to move across all borders with ease. As Kaliada explains, '[w]e have been informed by human rights organizations that we cannot go to Iran, Venezuela, Libya, China, Syria, Cuba, and Russia because of joint databases with Belarus'. Ibid.

²⁸ European Year of Worker Mobility (2006), 'Europa: Summaries of EU Legislation' <http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/internal_market/living_and_working_in_the_internal_market/c11333_en.htm> [accessed 2 August 2015].

workers'.²⁹ For further evidence of this emphasis, and the kinds of rhetoric it produces, you need look no further than EuroWork: European Observatory of Working Life, which outlines a recent shift in policy from an emphasis on 'flexicarity' (the so-called hybrid of worker flexibility and models of state security) to 'mobication' (a worker comprised of individualized and life-long mobility and education).³⁰ In other words within the geo-politics of neoliberalism the premise of growth in post-industrial capitalist state economies draws a close connection between competitive advantage and the mobility of its workers.

The cultivation and production of an idea of work that expresses the freedom of the individual to move can be seen as part of wider historical attempts under capitalism to invest new forms of productive power into labour. Under contemporary capitalism the characteristics of the labour market of the theatre maker – autonomous, flexible, good at team work, entrepreneurial as well as insecure, temporary, highly competitive, underpaid or low paid, tolerant of inequality – in short hungry, determined, and able to collaborate – has become an exemplary norm for a wider mode of production that seeks to free workers from restriction in support of greater private profit. As wider structural adjustments take hold in Europe, the precarious conditions that have consistently characterized the marginalized secondary labour market, primarily populated by women, migrants, artists, and low skilled workers, has been rolled out as the norm for a wider range of highly skilled labour.

The freedom of bodies to move across internal borders, currently enshrined in the EU's Lisbon Treaty is, importantly, a labour right, not a human right.³¹ And, one could argue that making labour mobility look attractive in the face of economic structural adjustments, diminishes human rights. The collapse of the distinction between the freedom to move and the freedom to work is ardently promoted by the arts sector in Europe with claims that, as a category of affairs, it performs; it makes things happen on a wider social scale. For example, a 2008 EU-funded report on labour mobility in the live performance sector reiterates a modernist case for an idealized relationship between arts and mobility that will help build a

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ European Working Conservatory is an EC-funded think tank. See Søren Kaj Andersen and Nikolaj Lubanski, 'Moving from Flexicurity to "Mobication"', 22 February 2012 <<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/2012/01/DK12010311.htm>> [accessed 2 August 2015]. EuroWork is an EU-funded think tank managed by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound).

³¹ Unlike the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the economic freedoms underpinning the EU's Lisbon Treaty include the freedom of labour to move for work.

competitive and strong Europe: '[a]rtists, like art itself, know no boundaries'.³² In the political economy of cultural exchange and contact, theatre and performance makers, as representative border crossers, might actually be auditioning for a confusingly scripted role; the 'aristocrat of labour'.³³

The instability of the labour category of the theatre and performance worker, where the salary of highly qualified workers is substantially lower than in other sectors, rubs against legislative borders like professional accreditation, visas, and taxation that are central to being able to move for work. Although a small percentage of 'worldclass' or state-supported theatre and performance workers can travel easily between borders to work, for many working in the theatre and performance sector it is often necessary or easier to appear in a different guise to make it across geographical borders to work.³⁴ For example, in the UK, non-EU national artists and academics arriving to take part in short engagements have been faced with deportation, refused visas, and treated with hostility.³⁵ The ability to make the journey to perform also often relies on informal networks to provide support in the form of, for example, housing.³⁶ The theatre and performance industry, like the creative industries more generally,

³² A preface by Mobile.Home Project leaders Riitta Seppälä and Mary Ann DeVlieg is followed by Richard Pulford's foreword, in Richard Poláček, *Study on the Impediments to Mobility in the EU Live Performance Sector and Possible Solutions* (Helsinki: Finish Theatre Information/Mobile. Home Project, 2007), pp. 5, 7. The project was supported by the European Commission's Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities.

³³ While details of this moniker vary, its existence owes to the Victorian belief in an upper class of manual workers. British labour theorist Eric Hobsbawm argues that 'the superiority of this stratum was economic (higher and more regular wages, greater chances of saving), social [. . .] political and cultural. Its members were "respectable" [. . .] or, as Victorians would have preferred to put it, moral'. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), p. 227.

³⁴ Although there has been a recent shift in policy with the introduction of the Permitted Paid Engagement visa, there are still questions about its implementation and on what constitutes a recognized arts organization.

³⁵ In 2014 Nabil al-Raei, the Freedom Theatre's Palestinian director was denied entry to the UK to participate in a speaking tour and in 2015 the Georgian theatre company New Collective's visa application to perform at Manchester's Flare festival was denied. On both counts the refusal of entry was tied to their apparent risk of migrating to the UK. See Johanna Wallin and Zoe Lafferty, 'Art for the Sake of Life: The History of Palestine's Freedom Theatre', *Open Democracy*, 30 July 2014 <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/johanna-wallin-zoelafferty/art-for-sake-of-life-history-of-palestine%27sfreedom-theatre>> [accessed 10 July 2015]; and Lyn Gardner, 'Georgian Theatre Company Refused Visa to Perform in Britain', *Guardian*, 3 June 2015 <www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2015/jun/03/georgian-theatrecompany-refused-visa-to-perform-in-britain> [accessed 10 July 2015].

³⁶ In 2014 the Belarus Free Theatre announced an appeal for patrons to house an actor for their upcoming production at the Young Vic. See 'House an Actor', Upcoming, Belarus Free Theatre

relies on service, knowledge, and communicative labour and conditions of work that are flexible, mobile, poorly paid, and temporary. And in order to support their work in the creative industries workers need to ensure that they can subsidize their participation with another source of income, to ensure ease of movement across different work contexts.

In the UK the rhetoric of mobility is key to the creative industries. Pauline Tambling, co-executive director of the Creative and Cultural Skills Council (CCSC) stresses that the creative and cultural industries have a higher percentage of flexibly self-employed workers than other industries.³⁷ Tambling argues that the beneficial outcome of government support for the creative and cultural industries will be a growth in self-employment, the creation of new jobs, and ‘fuel for a creative economy that will make Britain work again’.³⁸ This rhetoric of productivity, both in the wider economy and the performing arts industry, masks wider volatility, vulnerability, and inequity and raises some troubling questions. How can the performing arts sector, and the wider cultural and creative industries, support levels of employment – to borrow from Tambling – that ‘will make Britain work again’? Particularly during a period of aggressive disinvestment in education and the subsidized arts sector, which currently provides the primary means of employment for the majority working in, for example, the theatre subsector.³⁹

The rhetoric for artists and arts organizations to ‘grow’ their industry through entrepreneurial activity sits alongside established sectoral practices of freelancing, self-employment, and unpaid labour, which bring with them instability and uncertainty. Many artists who create their own work hold multiple jobs, often in roles that support artistic production. In a bid to get 500,000 young unemployed people into the sector through the Creative Employment Programme, spearheaded by the CCSC, Tambling indicates that one avenue the CCSC is pursuing involves targeting some of the ‘hidden jobs’ in the arts sector, for example ushering

<<http://www.belarusfreetheatre.com/productions/2014-accommodation-appeal/>> [URL no longer active].

³⁷ Pauline Tambling, ‘Freelancing and the Future of Creative Jobs’, *Building a Creative Nation, Creative and Cultural Skills*, 20 March 2015 <www.ccskills.org.uk/supporters/blog/freelancing-and-the-future-of-creative-jobs> [accessed 10 July 2015].

³⁸ Pauline Tambling, ‘Jobs and Work in the Creative Industries’, *Spotlight Symposium*, Queen Mary University of London, 24 June 2013.

³⁹ See Alexandra Albert, Hasan Bakhshi, Samuel Mitchell, and Rachel Smithes, *Publicly-Funded Arts as an R&D Lab for the Creative Industries? A Survey of Theatre Careers in the UK* (Essex: Creative and Cultural Skills, 2013), p. 3.

and box office, that ‘service the production’.⁴⁰ These jobs, according to Tambling, are not graduate posts but are inhabited by overqualified graduate workers and would be better suited for apprentices. In the CCSC’s picture of the performing arts sector these jobs will provide opportunities for apprentices to gain skills and knowledge that they can take forward into their own entrepreneurial business. The catch is that the career of the artist entrepreneur, known in the subsidized sector as the independent performance maker or company, is rarely ever fully developed into a self-sustaining enterprise.

More often than not workers in the sector only survive if they can also rely on income and contacts developed from other jobs, often those ‘hidden’ jobs that CCSC seeks to target for apprenticeships. What happens when apprentices take over the support jobs currently held by, primarily, arts graduates attempting to freelance or establish themselves in the arts?⁴¹ The cultural industries and specifically the performing arts sector have been marked by variable and declining growth prior to the 2008 economic downturn, with current recession employment rates in the arts having fallen more severely than previous periods.⁴² Current data on employment in the performing arts conservatively estimate that 30 per cent of those employed are on a part-time basis. With the average conditions of pay at £8.50 an hour, below the current living wage in London, the ability to cross the border from apprentice to self-sustaining art entrepreneur is, for the majority, not only impossible but a cruel fantasy.⁴³

Placing issues of labour and mobility alongside the rhetoric of ‘the border’ offers insight into the way theatre and performance might start to think about itself. Movement and openness,

⁴⁰ Tambling, ‘Jobs and Work in the Creative Industries’.

⁴¹ The 2013–15 award by the Creative Employment Programme to the London Theatre Consortium (LTC) may have impacted problematic labour ‘restructuring’ at one of its member organizations, the Young Vic. At the time of writing neither the theatre nor the LTC has responded to requests for a breakdown of apprenticeships in their organization nor was the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematography and Theatre Union (BECTU) aware of the apprenticeship programme. For more details on the 2013 LTC award see their website <http://www.londontheatreconsortium.com/lcclinches-500000-package-for-apprenticeship-programme/> [accessed 5 August 2015]. For more details on the labour issues that erupted at the Young Vic in June 2013 see Young Vic Staff Forum <<http://youngvicushersunite.blogspot.co.uk/>> [accessed 5 August 2015].

⁴² Benjamin Reid, Alexandra Albert, and Laurence Hopkins, *A Creative Block? The Future of the UK Creative Industries* (London: The Work Foundation, 2010), pp. 17–18.

⁴³ CCSC, ‘Creative and Cultural Industries Performing Arts Statistics, 2012–13’ <<https://ccskills.org.uk/supporters/advice-research/article/the-creative-and-cultural-industriesperforming-arts-2012-13>> [accessed 15 April 2016].; at the time of writing the current rate for a living wage in London is £9.15 and the national minimum wage is £6.50, *Living Wage*, <http://www.livingwage.org.uk/> [accessed 10 July 2015].

hallmarks of a civic progressiveness embedded in theatre's border discourses and practices, should also be viewed as attributes of a cultural sector in conversation with and complicit in wider power and financial structures. These discourses have developed, in part, to inculcate and reinforce alternative values of work to theatre and performance labour. In doing so, they have also inculcated and reinforced a sense that this work is autonomous and unaffected by dominant economic, cultural, and state infrastructures. Border discourses enable workers to inhabit a space–time that unites them, imaginatively and practically, with fellow workers around the world. They make visible a shared scene of labour, which is ordinarily individualized and atomized. However, the amplified narrative of civic co-presence that has been the preferred register of theatre and performance scholars and practitioners has, in the last 40 years, more often than not overwhelmed its productive character. The promise of freedom attached to border crossing in theatre and performance rubs uncomfortably against the economic reality of the theatre industry.

Conclusion

In June 2013, I attended Belarus Free Theatre's production of *Trash Cuisine*, a meditation on capital punishment that was commissioned by the European Cultural Foundation's project 'Imagining Europe'.⁴⁴ The show had its London premiere at the Young Vic Theatre.⁴⁵ The next morning I read an item on Twitter that led me to a blog post titled 'We're Scared, So We Are Doing This' on the Young Vic Staff Forum blog, written by the theatre's ushers and front of house staff.⁴⁶ Throughout June they used the blog to detail the ongoing labour restructuring at the theatre; a lack of consultation from their labour leadership the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU); their love for the artistic mandate of the Young Vic; and their shock and fear about impending job losses. The rhetoric of passion for the theatre's work was bound up with the workers' discussions of their labour conditions. The Young Vic's management initiative sought to restructure its labour pool of front of house staff, populated in part by freelance artists, known as the Welcome Team. This move followed a wider restructuring of ushers at the theatre, where management

⁴⁴ European Cultural Foundation, 'Imagining Europe'

<<http://www.culturalfoundation.eu/library/imaginingeurope?rq=belarus%20free%20theatre>> [accessed 2 August 2015].

⁴⁵ Arts Council England, *Capital Case Study: Young Vic Theatre, Waterloo*, Lambeth (London: ACE, 2009), p. 11.

⁴⁶ 'We're Scared, So We Are Doing This', Young Vic Staff Forum, 7 June 2013

<<http://www.youngvicushersunite.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/were-scared-so-we-are-doing-this.html>> [accessed 2 August 2015].

sought to tighten up on loose ad-hoc arrangements between staff swapping shifts. Noel McClean, BECTU's national official, found that the loose arrangement between ushers was the manifestation of the labour conditions of the wider sector rather than a lack of care or commitment by workers.⁴⁷ Often ushers, who were on a zero-hours contract with the Young Vic, were also on other zero hours or freelance contracts and juggling several different schedules. Management sought to regularize shifts and ushers were guaranteed a number of hours a season. The organization then turned its attention to other front of house operations and sought to restructure ten casualized jobs into four full time posts, which current workers could apply for. While these posts were also tied to zero hour contracts they tended to offer more regular work than ushering. And so, while some were happy with the proposed change, others, many who had worked at the organization for some time, struggled, as the casual nature of the work suited their other responsibilities and the nature of the industry they worked in. In response to the redundancies one commenter on the Young Vic's blog asked: '[a] wholesale sacking of the little people, the powerless ones. Surely not. This is the sort of inequality so frequently condemned from your own stage?'⁴⁸ The Young Vic explained that their choices were in the service of their customers and would ensure a more efficient and creative organization.⁴⁹ BECTU responded to deny accusations that their members were not consulted by claiming misrepresentation.⁵⁰ It was, McClean explains, 'a difficult time'.⁵¹

In April of 2015 BECTU welcomed the pay rise for the Young Vic's ushers to just below the London Living Wage. This followed on from discussions with management and the union during the 2012–13 restructuring that usher wages were very low and that the company

⁴⁷ Noel McClean in a phone interview with the author, 5 August 2015.

⁴⁸ Adam Marshall, Young Vic Blog, 17 June 2013 <<http://youngviclondon.wordpress.com/2013/06/15/2242/#comments>> [accessed 2 August 2015].

⁴⁹ David Lan and Lucy Woollatt, Young Vic Blog, 20 June 2013 <http://youngviclondon.wordpress.com/2013/06/> [accessed 1 July 2013].

⁵⁰ 'BECTU Statement on Talks at the Young Vic', BECTU, 17 June 2013 <www.bectu.or.uk/news/1942> [accessed 1 July 2013]. As McClean explained the first meeting on the restructuring did happen without the inclusion of the theatre's BECTU representative but this is a fairly common union practice. When organizations contact the union to discuss their plans 'you have to make a call about whether you take up the opportunity to get information earlier and scope out what the situation is in order to digest it'. McClean, 5 August 2015.

⁵¹ McClean, 5 August 2015.

should aspire to pay its workers in line with its own values and ideals.⁵² An interim rise was followed by a substantial pay rise in 2014 and then the current rise to £9 per hour. The Young Vic's overall pay rise is very welcome and should be commended. And the move towards de-casualization by the theatre in 2013 should, in many ways, be lauded for its attempts to buck neoliberal labour trends. However, the issue at play is the way the theatre industry, and the wider creative industries, rely on labour mobility – on labourers who are flexible and precarious. The incident at the Young Vic is one small example of the ways the industry neglects its own complex realities and its impact on workers.

So, how does my consideration of the labour conditions of the Young Vic, and the cultural industries more widely, link back to the Belarus Free Theatre, 'the border', and labour mobility? My desire to go to Minsk in 2009 was fuelled, in large part, by the affective attachments I have for the work Belarus Free Theatre has been doing. By that I mean not only the aesthetic work they produce but also the conditions under which they labour. In the case of the company, it is difficult for me to disentangle the two. I suggest that in the international theatre community Belarus Free Theatre's work holds particular symbolic weight. Perhaps it serves as a testament for many workers in the industry that theatre retains potency to mobilize against oppressive power. For example, playwright Tony Kushner, addressing an assembly of New York theatre workers supporting the company's campaign for freedom in 2011 declared, 'it's enormously inspiring that art can speak to tyranny [. . .] and art can have an effect on the world and make tyranny topple and injustice turn to justice'.⁵³ My drive to assemble, to be co-present, with the members of Belarus Free Theatre speaks to a wider hope in theatre and performance that seeks to enact a different kind of citizenship, one that creates alliances across borders. Part of the appeal of attending the company's performances, both inside and outside of Minsk, is an opportunity to experience a different kind of citizenship, one that is unauthorized and unsupported by the power structures of Belarus and which appeals to an ideal of liberation. Being co-present with Belarus Free Theatre appears to be a

⁵² In 2012-13 ushers on zero contract hours had their holiday pay included in their hourly rate, which artificially inflated the rate by 12.7 per cent. The Young Vic was close to being in breach of labour regulations of how holiday pay is distributed. McClean, 5 August 2015.

⁵³ 'The NY Theater Community Gathers in Manhattan to Protest', YouTube, 19 January 2011 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfhNYU5wxA0&NR=1&feature=endscreen> [accessed 2 August 2015].

process of developing and staging an unfinished performance, in the moment and in a potential future, of being ‘free’ together, united artistically and politically.

And yet, there is something uneasy, for me at least, in the impassioned embrace of Belarus Free Theatre by the theatre industry in the ‘West’. This is not because I lack an appreciation of what the company are doing, artistically and politically. Nor do I seek to undermine the very material and psychic impact the work they undertake has on their lives. Rather, I am troubled by the ways affective attachments to Belarus Free Theatre often divert attention from the conditions of production that are central to the cultural industries in global cities like London and New York. The scale and severity of human rights abuses Belarus Free Theatre addressed in *Trash Cuisine* are by no means the same as the labour rights abuses in play at the Young Vic in 2013 and their relationship to the complex labour market of the theatre and performance industry. State sanctioned torture and repression and labour mishandling by the management of a theatre organization and the workers’ union are not one and the same. However, there is something striking about a world-class building-based theatre that supports a globally recognized company, who is performing a political show about the disposability of human beings, employing a labour politics that ignores its wider complicated industrial context and assumes some of its very own theatre workers are disposable in the name of a better and more creative service.

My analysis of the underlying economic and political infrastructure that supports the fantasies of authenticity and social justice that are bound to the theatre and performance work is indebted to Lauren Berlant’s examination of the historical attachments to desires that anchor people to a particular place. Much of Berlant’s work circles around shared affective fantasies – be they national, social, or intimate – and their centrality in keeping people attached to situations. Berlant argues that while these attachments provide a framework to manoeuvre and flourish, the lived situations they rely on are often awkward, challenging, broken down, dangerous, and destructive. Berlant has identified optimistic attachments that enable while disabling as a ‘cruel optimism’; the continuity of the object is intertwined with the subject’s sense of meaningfulness in life.⁵⁴ Berlant employs the term ‘intimate public’ to explore the promises various objects offer to the development of a variety of cultural perspectives that stand in for political citizenship. ‘A public is intimate’ Berlant explains,

⁵⁴ Lauren Berlant, ‘Cruel Optimism’, *differences*, 17.3 (2006), 20–36 (pp. 20–21).

‘when it foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common’.⁵⁵ In *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Berlant argues that:

intimate spheres *feel* like ethical places based on the sense of capricious emotional continuity they circulate, which seems to derive from an ongoing potential for relief from the hard, cold world. Indeed the offer of the simplicity of the feeling of rich continuity with a vaguely defined set of like others is often the central affective magnet of an intimate public’.⁵⁶

Attending a Belarus Free Theatre show feels like a warm and ethical place to collaborate and perform forms of civic relation and operates as a resource for theatre and performance workers to operate as an ‘intimate public’. By that I mean, the affective labour of theatre and performance that is played out in celebrating the border when attending a Belarus Free Theatre show might also be seen as both a productive politics and a sublimation of commitments to exploitative, irrational, and uneven working conditions that underpin the sector.

Belarus Free Theatre is problematic for theatre and performance studies. Their brand identity in the West is inextricable from their productions, enhancing Western fantasies of democratic freedom. The narrative of illegality attached to the company’s operation functions to make an individual’s freedom to purchase a ticket to their performances in global centres and international festivals an expression of democratic assembly. The company capitalizes on this by appealing in their work to forms of citizenship that are without borders; metanarratives of human rights and theatre which tend to smooth or ignore the class politics and political economy that maintain the theatre industry and the wider world of work. I have been arguing that it is fruitful to attend to the ways in which hopes that fuel the theatre and performance industry intersect with the labour politics of neoliberal capitalism. Certainly, repressive regimes operate differently under Western capital and may be less easy to identify than the heavy hand of dictatorship and yet they are at work in shaping the theatre and performance

⁵⁵ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7; emphasis in original.

industry, where artists, companies, and organizations are constantly on the move in order to compete as leading transnational brands in world class creative capitals.

An Interview with Belarus Free Theatre, Minsk, 2009

Elyssa Livergant: *It seems that you and Natalia have become the international public face for Belarusian dissent and opposition. In what ways has theatre, and starting Belarus Free Theatre, allowed you to start lobbying for wider attention to what is happening in Belarus?*⁵⁷

Nikolai Khalezin: It is a fact that we are moving the political process forward but we do not belong to any political structure, which is also a fact. And political activists get a number of troubles from us just as they do from the dictatorship. And this is where our creativity mingles with our political position. If you do ‘analytical theatre’ this analysis spreads into all spheres. And if we notice that oppositional political structures do not behave in the way they should behave, we also criticize them. There is a kind of contradiction that democratic political circles should remain democratic and should try not to be suppressed by dictatorship.

EL: *Could you explain this a bit more?*

NK: There are democratic powers and there are dictatorships, and the society develops in the context of this. Theatre is exactly on the front line. The dictator doesn’t like theatre because theatre criticizes the dictator, or analyzes the sources of the dictator’s power. In the same way we explore the actions of democratic powers. Analysis leads to trouble for both democracy and dictatorship. People with democratic powers should not act like a dictator and not intimidate the dictator, although they have inclinations towards that. As a result the Belarus Free Theatre becomes reactive, which troubles both the sides. There are democratic politicians that cannot stand Belarus Free Theatre. We test them to see if they are future dictators.

EL: *What is it about Belarus Free Theatre that some democratic politicians can’t stand?*

NK: That we criticize political claims that they make and their passive position. There are many points of bifurcation, contact points. If you do ‘analytical theatre’ you should be engaging in all spheres of life, you should get into the very hell of it. Analyzing dictatorship is impossible when you’re sitting in Luxembourg. You should come, dive in, and figure out what is happening.

⁵⁷ This interview took place at a café in Minsk on 5 April 2009. During this interview Olga, the company’s translator at the time, undertook translation for Nicolai Khalezin. Additional translation support was provided by Ineta Serviate.

EL: *As political and economic systems begin to change in Belarus do you see new challenges for Belarus Free Theatre?*

NK: Yes, the economic crisis kind of makes the artistic process faster. I wrote in my blog a short ode to the crisis, which was read by 40,000 people, where I thank the crisis because it makes us see what we don't see in 'normal' life. In particular, we can now see the actions of European countries very clearly. We can observe the lack of morality in European governments. Europe is facing a serious moral crisis, which is supported by an economic crisis. I would like this economic crisis to push Europe to such a point where we'd start to pay attention to the moral situation. Now in Europe it's very easy to be a politician. Sarkozy is bringing Gaddafi to Paris.⁵⁸ Democratic journalists ask how can you bring this inhuman person to us. Sarkozy says we have contracts for ten billion dollars and all the discussion finishes.

EL: *Are you still active as a journalist?*⁵⁹

NK: Only on my blog and in comments.⁶⁰ About three times a year I write articles about what I consider to be actual important subjects of the moment.

EL: *How do you feel about the Eastern Partnership and Belarus becoming part of that?*⁶¹

NK: Of course I'm for it, with a line of specific requirements. One of them, for example, is that a person who is accused of killing opposition representatives cannot represent Belarus to Europe. This is a very strong position because out of the four opposition members, three were

⁵⁸ In December 2007 then French president Nicolas Sarkozy welcomed then Libyan leader Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi to visit France for the first time in 34 years, on international human rights day. The late Libyan dictator, who was killed in 2011, was known for the brutal treatment of the Libyan population upon seizing control of the country in a coup d'état in 1969. His government was linked to numerous terrorist attacks, including the Lockerbie bombing in 1988. His 2007 visit coincided with an arms and nuclear energy deal between the two countries. Elaine Sciolino, 'Divided, France Welcomes and Condemns Qaddafi', *New York Times*, 10 December 2007 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/11/world/europe/11france.html>> [accessed 5 August 2015]. More recently it has been alleged that the visit also coincided with the Libyan's illegal funding of Sarkozy's 2007 election campaign: Kim Willsher, 'Gaddafi "Contributed £50m to Sarkozy's 2007 Presidential Election Fund"', *Guardian*, 12 March 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/12/gaddafi-contributed-sarkozy-2007-election>> [accessed 5 August 2015].

⁵⁹ Khalezin was a journalist before founding the Belarus Free Theatre. His articles were often critical of Lukashenko's leadership. He was the editor of several newspapers that were closed down by the government. In 2010 during the crackdown on opposition voices in Belarus it was alleged that the KGB had issued a warrant for his arrest. 'Belarus: KGB Issues Warrant for Nikolai Khalezin', Index on Censorship, 29 December 2010 <<http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2010/12/belarus-kgb-issue-arrest-warrant-for-nikolai-khalezin/>> [accessed 5 August 2015].

⁶⁰ Khalezin's blog can be found at <<http://kilgor-trautt.livejournal.com/823678.html>> [accessed 2 August 2015].

⁶¹ The Eastern Partnership was launched in 2009 as a joint initiative between the EU, EU countries, and the EU's 'eastern European partners' (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine). See 'Eastern Partnership' <http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/index_en.htm> [accessed 2 August 2015].

my friends.⁶² And the fourth one is the husband of the godmother of my daughter. So this position will not change. I have an absolute right to my subjective point of view. And that doesn't change much. Lukashenko is charming Europe and he's being quite successful at it. He's pretending to have a realization, to make things better, to have a democratic movement. In reality he releases one political prisoner and puts the others in prison again. And then this Javier Solana comes [to Minsk] and says yes, of course, it's a democratic movement.⁶³ Europe says yes, democracy! Now we are a continent without dictatorship. We can congratulate you and we can ignore ten million opinions because ten million Belarusians aren't much. That's this concentration camp system. We'll pretend not to know about those who are in concentration camps. Then they send a commissioner to the concentration camps and we show them these nice, pleasant facades and they say, 'oh, it's not so bad', let's consider it a boys' camp.

EL: *You have had contact with EU politicians recently. Last week you were in Prague for the launch of the Eastern Partnership summit. Why do you think the BFT is invited to attend such gatherings?*⁶⁴

NK: Politicians consider that we are influential in political spheres so they try to invite us to these occasions. Also we had to meet Vaclav Havel, so we went to meet and speak with him. It's a strange thing when you are inside the European political processes and you don't convert it into financial gain. That's why a lot of people say we are crazy idealists. We'd rather be crazy idealists than European pragmatists. That way we have a chance to bring up good daughters.

EL: *What pressures or challenges does the lack of financial support present to your activity?*

NK: It means that we need to work more intensely. We should be different than all other theatres in the world and then we can be successful. We always need to be faster so we have an advantage over the others that follow. We should always get faster and faster to keep the distance between others and us. We have lots of followers and they are constantly at our heels so we have to hurry up.

EL: *When you say different than other theatres what do you mean?*

NK: There is a great Russian philologist called Vladimir Dal and he has a definition: creation is creating new, making new, inventing new.⁶⁵ This new has to be absolutely different to

⁶² In 2000 two of the four opposition members that 'disappeared' included Viktor Gonchar, the leader of the opposition in Belarus and Anatoly Krasovsky, a Belarusian businessman. Krasovsky's wife Irina is godmother to Khalezin and Kakinada's child. The Krasovskys' life together and Krasovsky's disappearance is the subject of *Discover Love*, a play by the company written by Khalezin.

⁶³ Javier Solana held the post of Security General of the Council for the European Union and was the Union's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy from 1999 to 2009.

⁶⁴ The conference was the EU and US summit in Prague, held in May 2009. BFT were invited to the launching of the Eastern Partnership summit with its production *Generation Jeans*, an invitation given by Vaclav Havel. See 'Free Theatre Presented Performance Dedicated to Belarusian Political Prisoners', *Charter 97*, 7 May 2009

<<http://charter97.org/en/news/2009/5/7/17956/>> [accessed 5 August 2015].

⁶⁵ Vladimir Dal was a nineteenth-century Russian collector of language and tales. He is most well known for producing the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Live Great Russian Language* (1863), the first of its kind in Russia.

what's been done before. Only this will move the theatrical process forward. That can be in different forms and different expressions. That can be from new ways of making a play or new concepts of theatrical presentation that no one has expressed before.

EL: *Have you made any connections with young activists, bringing them in contact with the Fortinbras to create new forms of theatre on the streets?*

NK: We worked with them even before Belarus Free Theatre was launched. We have good connections with most of the movements for change that are happening. We visit them, we talk with them and we are in communication with lots of different groups.⁶⁶ You may have noticed that at the closing ceremony of our Fourth International Contest festival, there was a table in the corner with a lot of young people, just when you entered on the right.⁶⁷ These were the people who are activists of the youth movement.⁶⁸ We have taken part in organizing big political rallies and our actors took part by reading the letters of political prisoners onstage. This was at one of the largest political rallies, where there were about 10,000 people. That's what I was talking about, the intersection between creativity and real life. If we are charged with it we can express it with competence on stage. And it's not only about politics.

EL: *You used the term 'analysis theatre' earlier and I'd like to unpack this term. What do you mean when you say analytical theatre?*

NK: It means being integrated into the spirit of what we are talking about. The actor should dive into the spirit of the play and figure out what is happening and be able to represent this competently on stage. And then some discussion appears around this. You should always be aware of what happens in the discussion phase because you might find something that will be useful in the development of the process. In comparison to classical stages you have a lot of channels of back and forth connection. We draw on the context, blogs, state media, and first person reports.

EL: *Let's talk about funding. I notice that you don't charge for your performances in Minsk. The students don't pay to attend classes at Fortinbras. You don't get any funding from your government. I assume your performers are paid to take part. I assume you pay others and yourselves, in order to keep going. How do you fund what you are doing?*

NK: Funding influences where we perform, where we can get something in order to pay the actors. Probably in Eastern Europe we're now the best scanners of the world theatrical festival situation. And there are two aspects that provides, we search and we are being sought

⁶⁶ There are several main democratic movements in Belarus that function with the support of the Assembly of Belarusian Pro-Democratic NGOs, which was formed in 1997. BFT have received promotional support for much of their work through Charter 97, one of the main pro-democracy human rights organizations in the country.

⁶⁷ The closing ceremony was held on 3 April 2009 in a small restaurant in Minsk.

⁶⁸ The democratic youth movement in Belarus is comprised of several different organizations campaigning for an independent Belarus including Young Belarus and Youth Front. The youth movement, initiated in 2005, is reported to be active in attempting to establish a democratic government in the country. As such, they are often the target of government suppression, including targeted arrest at demonstration, sentences of forced labour, and exile to remote locations. See Ekaterina Forbes, 'Support for Belarusian Youth Activists: Cooperation or Co-optation? Prospects for Democratization in Belarus' (unpublished Master's thesis, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 2009), pp. 54–63.

out and this helps us survive. Plus there are always our friends who are trying to support and help us.

Natalia Kaliada: So when we started it was Nikolai's royalties from his play in Moscow. It was a very big fee, the largest paid in the former Soviet Union Theatre. We started with it and then my brother, who lives in the United States, started to help. When all of this money was finished we started to borrow money. Today we owe £48,000 to different people, who happily told us that we could return this money when the situation is changed. Beside this there are a few friends who help us, but we cannot name them as our supporters. Usually in all books we write that it is informational support. This year the whole international playwriting contest and international workshops were held with help from supporters; they paid for your visit. We would never give these names to anyone because they could lose their diplomatic licence and we could get two to six years on criminal economic charges.⁶⁹

EL: *You could go to jail because you received foreign economic support for your activities? What about Fortinbras? How do you manage to keep that going?*

Kaliada: When we started, we started everything from scratch both with the theatre and then with Fortinbras. Again, when we started the studio everyone worked for half a year free of charge. Then we received some support but it will be over in June. We said that we will teach the students for two years, so for the next year we will need to borrow money again because there will be no support. And the same thing for the documentary we started to make. There is no support at all. But, for example, when we know we will go to Prague then we will organize an interview with Vaclav Havel at the same time. When we know Nikolai's play will be in rehearsals in Leeds, so because our visit to the UK is paid for we are able to organize an interview with Tom Stoppard. We are always finding possibilities. When we come to London we will live in the apartments of our friends. We understand that from inside the country, it looks like we are living a very enviable life and we have received bad press for this. For example at the closing ceremony for [this year's playwriting] contest there was a person who attended who was from the Ministry of Culture. This happens quite often. Someone doesn't call or give their name and they just appear. He went to listen to the readings and he went to the closing ceremony and the main thing he wrote was that Mark Ravenhill's plays were terrible and there was a lot of vodka and food. This was his main conclusion. There was nothing about our organization as the only one conducting public events and play readings from writers from all over the world.

EL: *Where did he write this?*

Kaliada: In a blog on the Internet.

EL: *Was his aim to make the company's lifestyle appear excessive to his readership?*

Kaliada: Yes, and because he works for the Ministry of Culture it means that this information will be reprinted in the state news media. This is not the first time. However, I

⁶⁹ Kaliada is likely referring to Presidential Decree No. 8 adopted in March 2001. Titled 'On Some Measures Concerning the Rules of Receipt and Utilization of Foreign Gratuitous Aid', it prohibits the receipt of foreign funds for activities that engage with issues of human rights, ecological issues, youth, and education. See *Human Rights Watch World Report*, 2003 (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2003), p. 316.

believe this is their problem not ours.

EL: *I think your very presence, as a producing company in Belarus is political. When I was looking at my fellow audience members in Minsk watching Discover Love, Numbers, and Zone of Silence I was struck by the power of what you are doing here.⁷⁰ You are creating representations for the public of contemporary Belarus that do not appear in state theatre or media. At the same time, you have created a space for people to work and learn from each other as members of the company or as members of the studio. There are not many independent spaces like this in Belarus.*

Kaliada: When we came to France the first time journalists said that everyone knows that Belarus is the last dictatorship in Europe. I don't believe that because journalists know that Belarus is ruled by a dictator that everyone knows this. I said that our main goal now is to explain to Europe that Belarus and Free Theatre are one and the same. It's not just that it's the last dictatorship and its identity is tied to a dictator. It's a population of ten million people. It means there are so many people here that develop their talents in different areas. We tell people that we want them to understand that Belarus is the Free Theatre. I believe for the last three years we have reached this point. Now people think, yes this is the last dictatorship but they also think this is the place from where the Free Theatre comes from. It is our main aim to explain that there are people here who produce high quality artistic work. All of these ten million will come to the border of the European Union when democracy comes here. The other thing is that these ten million people could come to the border if a Russian invasion takes place, because there would be many refugees. Europe needs to be ready for these people.

Another point, when we went to a festival in Dublin to speak on the issue of resistance in public at a large symposium I said that public space in Belarus only exists underground. It was a very simple phrase for us because we understand that this is our reality.⁷¹ All the people in the audience stood up and started to applaud and we didn't understand what was going on. It was such a simple phrase. Public space exists underground in Belarus. Irish people started asking about how to make more spaces, like cinema, theatre, and cafés, where people can gather in public spaces. It seems there is only one space for us to gather in Belarus and this is the only place where high quality artistic stuff exists. It's very interesting. Suddenly we came to the point where we stopped caring whether people have come to see us as political theatre or not political theatre. When Tom Stoppard came to us Kolia asked him, '[y]ou are very often blamed that you are politically involved, how do you respond to this' and he said the main thing is to stand by your principle. I believe this is one of our credos.

EL: *How do you define high quality theatre and what are the principles that underpin them studio where you train students?*

NK: High quality means eliciting a high degree of emotions from an audience. If you are not sincere you will not get these emotions. Only this. In terms of the studio it is about the

⁷⁰ All three plays were performed at the company's performance space, a two-room house on the outskirts of Minsk, on 1–2 April 2009. This was part of the wider programme for the International Contest of Modern Drama and Festival the company convened in Spring 2009.

⁷¹ This discussion took place at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin on 21 February 2008 <<http://archive.org/details/BelarusFreeTheatre1>> [accessed 5 August 2015].

creation of leaders. We have spent too much time working with slaves and it's not interesting. We need people who argue with us, who quarrel with us, and who doubt our words. Something new may come out of that. We are creating universal soldiers. It should be a person who can write a text, act in a text, stage the text, be a manager and be able to sell his product. And that's where we differ from strategies of old theatrical schools. We think a new time needs a new approach. Today it's not enough to only be an actor. There are a huge number of very professional but very empty personalities on the stages of the world. What we're doing in our school is a synthesis of individual and collective work. Their ideal view should be towards the final production and they are in this production. We are explaining that you can be interesting and popular only if what you produce is interesting and popular. That's why everything comes to that final point, in this final production, in the contact with the audience.

Kaliada: We had one very interesting case. We arrived in Finland and spoke with the director of one of the Finnish festivals. We thanked him for inviting us, as it was a great support for us. He said, '[i]f I want to give you support, I'll send you a letter of support. You're here because of the high quality of your artistic product.' We are often blamed by Russian theatre critics for being too politicized. This is an ongoing discussion, I would say. It is interesting because when we received the European Theatre Prize last year, mainstream people from Europe were saying we received this prize only because of propaganda, that our work is too politicized. Rimini Protokoll came to see all our performances and they told us that our performances were amazing and when they went to the stage to accept their award they told the audience, more than 2,000 representatives from European Theatre there, that we should receive the artistic prize because of our performances not only because of our politics.⁷² This was very interesting for us.

EL: *How did this shift the way you thought about your work? What is the company's relationship to aesthetics and politics?*

Kaliada: It is very difficult to explain every time that we cannot stay in a friendly position to the dictatorship because our friends were kidnapped and killed. That's why we say it everywhere, Belarus is under dictatorship and we are very actively involved in what's happening in Belarus. When we produced Sarah Kane (4.48 Psychosis), which was directed by Vladimir Shcherban, or Mark Ravenhill it's difficult to explain, it's not political stuff but everyone in Europe expects us to be political.⁷³ When we produced Sarah Kane we asked 27 venues in Minsk and everyone said no to us because each topic, like suicide or sexual matters, is political here. So we decided to accept any category. You can call us anything you want. If we can change the situation here we're glad to be named something else.

⁷² At the tenth annual Europe Theatre Prize, held in April 2008 in Thessaloniki, Rimini Protokoll received a prize for New Theatrical Realities and Belarus Free Theatre received a 'special mention'. See *Europe Theatre Prize* <http://www.premioeuropa.org/open_page.php?id=630> [accessed 5 August 2015].

⁷³ Performances of Mark Ravenhill's play were produced and directed by Vladimir Shcherban and not as the Belarus Free Theatre.