

Expat lives | Minsk to London

Dramatic exit to a new stage

Political activist who set up an underground theatre movement in Belarus but was forced to flee to the UK.
By *Isabella Scott*

May 16 2011 is etched in the memory of Natalia Kaliada, the co-founder of Belarus Free Theatre (BFT). It is the day she discovered she would not be able to return to her homeland.

"It's a strange story," says Kaliada, 40. "We landed in London from New York, having been smuggled out of Belarus five months earlier. We thought we were in transition, as we awaited the right moment to return home. But we received information that our friends were being sentenced to long-term imprisonment in part of a large criminal case that implicated me and my husband. We could not return."

Belarus, a landlocked country bordering Russia, is often labelled "Europe's last dictatorship", and its leader, Alexander Lukashenko, has been in power for 20 years.

Following the controversial Belarus elections in 2010, more than 600 demonstrators were arrested in a crackdown on the election opposition movement; many were later charged at Minsk's high court with "organising mass disturbance". Kaliada, who was implicated with her husband, Nicolai Khalezin, fled from Belarus in January 2012 but many of their friends were later imprisoned.

Khalezin, a Belarusian journalist, was once editor of Belarusian newspapers Name and News, before they were shut down by the government in the 1990s. Stranded in the UK, the couple and

their two daughters sought political asylum, and have since made London their home. "The experience was shocking", she says, "and the asylum process is quite humiliating".

Reports of Kaliada's political persecution were widespread in the media, and the UK government approved her application a month later. The family's first weeks were spent in Aldershot, Hampshire, staying with a Belarusian friend, whose brother - opposition politician Andrei Sannikov - was in jail in Belarus.

Kaliada, a native of Minsk, was born into a theatrical family. Her father was once vice-chancellor of the Academy of Arts in Belarus, but was dismissed because of his association with his daughter's political activities.

In 2005 she and her husband co-founded the BFT with the theatre director Vladimir Shcherban. In the same year their theatre movement was forced underground when Belarus intelligence agencies discovered their activities. When they could no longer perform at any official venues, performances took place in secret, under the guise of private parties in cafés, homes and even in forests - staging work by the British playwright Sarah Kane, alongside outlawed Belarusian counterparts.

The BFT's first UK performance took place in Leeds in 2007 and, to date, the troupe has toured an impressive 42 countries, gaining support from eminent figures such as Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard and Václav Havel. "We have always had connections to the UK," says Kaliada, "and we have found so much support here. Our first home in London was the Young Vic theatre - David Lan [artistic director] gave us a permanent workspace when he heard of our situation. This workspace has been the only stable place in our lives."

She now lives in Islington, north London, with her family - the sixth home



Natalia Kaliada in The Cut Bar at the Young Vic, London

Hal Shinnie

'When you know you might lose your life, you realise objects don't matter'

since she was granted asylum in 2011 - sharing the home of activist and entrepreneur Joseph Corré, son of Vivienne Westwood, and one of many figures who have supported Kaliada and her family.

"We've lived with Sigrid Rausing's parents, and at Michael Attenborough's parents' home, and now Joseph Corré has opened his home to us," she says.

Corré has offered a living space for two years, helping Kaliada build a safe home for her two daughters, the youngest of whom is 15 and attends Parliament Hill School for girls.

"I wanted to be an actress and studied history with a view to being a diplomat. But when I graduated, Lukashenko came to power - I'd never work under his governance."

Kaliada uses theatre to create a dialogue and raise awareness of the Belarusian cause. To that end, she has fused

two roles, becoming a theatre director and operating as a rebellious diplomat. She says London is a captivating city and was told about it by her brother who first visited in the 1980s. "I have always loved London tremendously," she says, "and although to live here was an accident, at some point we decided to stay - it became a choice, and a home".

She likes exploring the city by bus, adding: "The best thing is the bridges - the moment when the city opens itself, and you see from one side to another. In those complicated moments, when the fight feels too much, crossing a bridge fills me with hope."

Her family have few belongings from Minsk. "I lived in one house in Belarus for 36 years - it was in our family for four generations. And suddenly everything was lost. We left with no luggage, thinking we'd return in a few weeks. But when

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Kaliada's verdict . . .

Pros

Rich cultural diversity

Globally renowned for the performing arts, with many celebrated theatres

Cons

Expensive to rent a home

Congestion, high traffic levels and expensive public transport

Favourite places . . .

The Cut Bar at the Young Vic The coffee here is fantastic, and I love the pistachio and orange marmalade muffins

Brew Box Bubble Tea, Angel This is my two daughters' favourite place to drink

Eagle Wharf, Islington A beautiful, quiet canal for a morning walk

you understand you might lose your life, you realise objects don't really matter."

Belarusian cuisine lives on in the family home. "We eat at home the way we did in Minsk - things like Slavic potato pancakes, fried onions, sour cream and black rye bread," says Kaliada.

She is also nostalgic for "moonshine" - the illicitly distilled alcohol brewed in rural households. "Belarusian moonshine is perfect," she says.

Despite London's diversity, Kaliada cannot name a Belarusian restaurant there. "It's a dream of ours to open one."

She adds: "There are many requests to work with young people. We aim to share the practice of transforming stories into a very specific kind of theatre - one that is not about entertainment, but rather it's a tool, to speak to audiences, to show that we are all just people."

Kaliada hopes for a different future in her homeland and she dreams of launching a theatre there, adding: "If democracy was to arrive, we'd open a big theatre in Belarus, and ask the friends we have made to share their great art with people there."

"After 20 years of information isolation, it would be time for Belarus to absorb the great works of art."



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