

In Russia, You Must Not Wake Anybody – Reflection Statement

Extension II English Major Work

*You are your life and nothing else*¹

- J.P Sartre

¹ Sartre, J.P. *No Exit*, Full text http://archive.org/stream/NoExit/NoExit_djvu.txt [15/05/14]

My play, “In Russia you must not wake anybody” exposes the effects of indoctrination and encourages the examination of simplistic structures including political ideology and reliance on government decision-making that define our lives. The title, from a poem by Nahum Korzhavin, is a metaphor for those with a non-critical mind fearing to challenge the reality of their existence.^{2,3}

The idea of a fictionalised story about a dictator was suggested by Roald Dahl’s *Genesis and Catastrophe*, examined in an Extension II class⁴. In my grandparents’ garage, I found a 1953 article reporting Stalin’s death⁵. While Hitler generated a plethora of fictional material, Stalin’s crimes were of a similar magnitude; however, he did not seem to be the subject of such opprobrium.⁶ My grandmother who lived under Russian rule recounted how individual rights were undermined in a society of fear and suspicion⁷. I read Rayfield’s biography of Stalin, detailing Stalin’s death and the time gap between his stroke and the discovery of his body.⁸ My HSC Drama inspired me to construct a play around this interval. A dramatised account of the hours during which his servants feared to enter his room, would become a lens through which I could show what happens when certainty crumbles.

² Nahum Korzhavin was a Russian of Jewish descent who emigrated to the U.S. and became a notable critic of the USSR. The poem is cited in Rayfield R 2004 *Stalin and his Hangmen* Viking 2004, introduction.

³ “Until the mid-50’s Korzhavin had been left more or less on the sidelines of Soviet literary life unable to communicate to their readers the catastrophes of their age, the prison camps and the war.” cited in Ed Jones P 2006, “The Dilemmas of de-Stalinization negotiating Cultural Change in the post Khrushchev era”, Routledge London
<http://books.google.com.au/books?id=g7dYiQYo1nWC&pg=PA234&lpg=PA234&dq=naum+korzhavin&source=bl&ots=JvVZHLBrkp&sig=IXsKD3AURgAfowVII2krU9levhg&hl=en&sa=X&ei=xxZ0U76ABtGQuASft4LIDg&ved=0CCwQ6AEwATgK#v=onepage&q=naum%20korzhavin&f=false> [15/05/14]

⁴ Dahl, R 1962 “Genesis and Catastrophe”

⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald* 1953 no date

⁶ “The Q&A: Timothy Snyder, historian”, Jun 3rd 2011, 14:46 by L.O. The Economist | New York
<http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2011/06/hitler-and-stalin> [14/05/14]

⁷ Interview 12/05/14

⁸ Rayfield, R 2004, op cit

My initial idea was to focus on the disillusionment manifested in the loss of hope in the Russian Revolution with the realisation that there is no logic in Stalin's purges. Having seen Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* at the STC, I explored Theatre of the Absurd as a structure. I found congruence with Martin Esslin's contention:

"There can be little doubt...such a collapse and disillusionment of all previously held beliefs is a characteristic feature of our own times."⁹

This could connect to a modern Australian context because disillusionment can be found in a distrusted political system, an increasingly homogenised media and a reliance on popular culture we use to define ourselves.

I envisioned the play would be performed at the Belvoir Theatre; where subscribers range from University students to middle class intellectuals appreciative of new Australian plays.¹⁰

I wanted the audience to see beyond a biography of a despotic leader and to question the consequences of accepting secure structures. Through comedy, mime, satire and farce, which undermine the didactic nature of the play, I wanted to show that this questioning creates an existential fear as expressed by Sartre, "We are condemned to be free",¹¹ because the world, on which we rely has lost its meaning.

Initially using a didactic tone, I refined my concept by exploring the political and literary context during Stalin's reign and its impact on the writers of the period. Independent reading

⁹ Esslin, M. 1961, *Theatre of the Absurd*, Pelican Books, United States, Introduction

¹⁰ In 2012, 11 of 14 productions were new Australian works.

¹¹ Sartre, JP1946, "Existentialism and Humanism", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Paul_Sartre [15/05/14]

of selected nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian political satire and drama led to drafts incorporating theatrical techniques and appropriations gleaned from writers such as Gogol¹², Bulgakov¹³ and Meyerhold.¹⁴

By my eighth draft, my play had a clearer purpose. The action revolves around Stalin's two servants, one believing in a world of absolutes where submission to Stalin is the ultimate achievement. These absolutes are destroyed and 30 years of objective certainty crumble in an instant. The second servant, a writer who can no longer write, understands the power of indoctrination, and represents those who have become paralysed by fear. He resorts to irony and sarcasm. The other characters act as foils illustrating that their lives are defined by the regime's certainty.

While the concept is absurd as articulated by Ashraf Ahmed, "man inhabits a universe with which he is out of key..."¹⁵ it incorporates characteristics of political theatre, in particular, satire. The form evolved to include other formats. In this short, two scene play, I have also used some Brechtian techniques including the 'Verfremdungseffekt' and breaking the fourth wall to "force the audience to take a "critical perspective on events being dramatised"¹⁶.

Lyotard's post-modernist rejection of a totalising cultural narrative as an explanation of an entire body of knowledge¹⁷, as studied in English Extension I, also influenced my work.

¹² Gogol N. 1962 *Taras Bulba and Other Tales*, Everyman Library, Great Britain

¹³ Bulgakov, M 2004, *The Master and Margarita*, Vintage Books, London

¹⁴ Pitches, J. 2003, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, Routledge, United States

¹⁵ Ahmed, A 2014, "Basic Concept of the Theatre of the Absurd", 4752768 Academia.edu, http://www.academia.edu/4752768/Basic_Concept_of_the_Theatre_of_the_Absurd [02/05/14]

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_theatre [02/05/14]

¹⁷ Fairfield, P. "Habermas, Lyotard and Political Discourse", Reason Papers, A Journal of Interdisciplinary Normative Studies Marymount Manhattan College N.Y (no date)

Starostin, the servant who readily accepts the Stalinist narrative as an objective truth, embodies this concept, satirised within the play.

Starostin: A person, who knows more about Stalin, knows more. For that ... is the most important thing to know.¹⁸

Barthes' essay, *The Death of the Author* provided the theoretical foundation for Stalin's voicelessness within the play. Barthes argues against the method of reading and criticism that relies on aspects of the author's identity to distil meaning from their work¹⁹. By making Stalin "voiceless" I removed him from his own historical context, allowing for audience interpretation of his character.

While not seeking to replicate *Waiting for Godot*, the definition of the human situation as meaningless and absurd,²⁰ resonated with my concept of a world where we allow simplistic structures to rule our lives. Indeed, my play differentiates itself from Beckett, as unlike *Godot*, the play is not static, reaches a definite conclusion on the human condition and the historical elements of the play provides the knowledge that Stalin is 'not waking up', whereas *Godot's* appearance remains ambiguous. Starostin responds to a meaningless existence by constructing an illusion of the invincible leader and illusory Motherland. Tukov's mocking of a regime, pretending to be rational, is reminiscent of the absurdist critique of authoritarian regimes in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. Sartre's *No Exit*²¹ with its sense of entrapment and absurdity has parallels to the space my characters inhabit. Influenced by Stoppard's

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¹⁸ Major Work 2014

¹⁹ Barthes, R "The Discourse of History", Trans. Bann S. *Comparative Criticism*, 3 (1981): pp7-20
<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/pcraddoc/barthes.htm> [15/5/14]

²⁰ Ahmed, A 2014, op cit.

²¹ Sartre, JP 1944, *No Exit*, op cit

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern,²² my characters spend the time with a riddle. The juxtaposition of the characters' attitudes provides dramatic tension throughout the play.

I built the situation faced by writers in an oppressed society into the point of view of my subversive character. When Voroshilov asks Tukov to tell him "what he has written", Tukov refuses staying within the security of conformity. His attitude resonates with Isaiah Berlin's assessment of the writers of the period who are, "careful to do nothing to offend while...others apply themselves to ...calculation of whether they can afford to give up to the demands of state propaganda, how much being left to personal integrity"²³.

Bulgakov's satire of Stalin's regime, *The Master and Margarita*²⁴, provided insight into a system that found absurd explanations for its failures. My appropriations from this novel add a literary texture to the play. The writer known as the Master, in an effort to escape the criticisms levelled at writers in the 1930s, burns his manuscript. It is returned to him later with the comment, "Manuscripts don't burn".²⁵ Bulgakov had burnt an early copy of *The Master and Margarita* for similar reasons. In my play, Tukov refusing to read his poetry says he has burnt his manuscript. When Starostin expresses regret for this act, Tukov repeats, "Manuscripts don't burn."

Meyerhold exemplifies the situation faced by writers in the period. Having initially supported the regime, his theatre was closed and he was shot in 1940. In his 1926 production of the *Government Inspector* based on Gogol's play, Meyerhold directed "an accusatory

²² Stoppard, T 1994, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Grove Press

²³ Berlin, I 2000, "The Arts in Russia under Stalin", *The New York Review of Books*
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/oct/19/the-arts-in-russia-under-stalin/?page=2#fn7-516603913> [08/01/14]

²⁴ Bulgakov, M 2004, op cit

²⁵ Ibid p 326

production... (of) the entire Nicholayan era..."²⁶ and emphasised the grotesque elements of the play. I have borrowed the idea of the 'grotesque', manipulating the door through which the characters fear to enter by its domination of the stage and caricaturing the face of the clock to show the collapse of the notion of time when life is defined by fixed structures. Echoing Meyerhold, I employ character tableaux to emphasise key points in the play.

I struggled with the play's language. I was influenced by the language in the film "Borat" to parody prejudice and ignorance²⁷. I tried to do this by copying Russian accented English, omitting articles, changing word order and using common Russian words. Starostin uses the anglicised "Comrade" as a salutation. "Tovarich" is used by the higher ranked Russians and the driver. To stress moments of tension, I have borrowed the pause as a form of speech from Harold Pinter.²⁸

Following my Supervisor's advice, I researched the history of Soviet clowning – a form of entertainment that was centralised by the Soviets.²⁹ While the literature is not conclusive with regard to the extent to which it reinforced or subverted the system, the clowning of my characters is used to satirise the regime.

²⁶ Meyerhold, V, "Meyerhold on Theatre", Edward Braun, trans, New York: Hill and Wang, 1969, 209 in

http://www.sras.org/gogol_the_government_inspector_in_text_and_presentation_1836_1938) [21/01/14]

²⁷ Cohen, S B 2006, "Borat : Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan", Director Larry Charles U.S.A. Comedy film

²⁸ Eggers, W "You never heard such silence", Centerstage 2010-2011 Season
<http://www.centerstage.org/thehomecoming/Digital-Dramaturgy/Youve-Never-Heard-Such-Silence.aspx> 18/07/14

²⁹ Neirick M 2012 "When Pigs Could Fly and Bears Could Dance: A History of the Soviet Circus", Preview
http://books.google.com.au/books?id=piUKBbyqc7EC&pg=PA95&lpg=PA95&dq=Karandash+the+clown+and+politics&source=bl&ots=ZzeZXmNpxK&sig=sLuqp0iNZAJx3VEJCFo1NYWE_zs&hl=en&sa=X&ei=m4BkU6ORic2XkwWHkoCwBw&ved=0CD0Q6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=Karandash%20the%20clown%20and%20politics&f=false [03/05/14]

Music within the play is used to create a Russian atmosphere. *The Hymn for Red October* made famous by the *Red Army Choir* evokes Soviet patriotism juxtaposed with Tukov's satiric response to Starostin's acceptance of the regime. A constant motif is that Stalin was active in ridding Russia of Rasputin, illustrating that Stalinist ideology pervades Russian history. The play's concluding moment uses the Bony M song *Rasputin*. This anachronistic song allows the audience to consider the seriousness of the play.

After a reading with actors, I reluctantly cut one character and several episodes and restructured the play to two scenes to increase pace and tension. In the light of further feedback, I worked on differentiating my characters through dialogue. The play's ending draws together the themes of fear, paralysis and truth and my characters opt for the return to domination of the (new) leader rather than face the unknown.

The play's creation has involved more research than I had expected; and I am grateful for my supervisor's support. Unlike my characters, I hope I have found the courage to accept the challenge and "open the door".

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“I, 25310977 testify that the work entitled *In Russia, You Must Not Wake Anybody* has been composed during the HSC Year and is original. I have taken every measure to ensure that it is referenced accurately and that any information or mentor can be tracked through my journal and bibliography.”

Initials:

Signature:

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