

Jun 29 2014

## Theatre review: Red Forest at the Young Vic

Bernard Keenan

*An advocate for and student of human rights, Jeremy Greenberg is currently undertaking his Master's studies at the LSE. His research interests include indigenous rights and climate change, and his dissertation focuses on human rights violations by the extractives industry. When he's not busy studying or confronting Lord Browne with pointed questions about fracking, he can be found blogging at [jeremygreenberg.blogspot.ca](http://jeremygreenberg.blogspot.ca). A debt of gratitude is owed to LSE Master's candidate Nathalie Dijkman, whose research on the BFT, political theatre, and "refugee art" informed this review.*

Red Forest

**Thus for art to be 'unpolitical' means only to ally itself with the 'ruling' group.**

– Bertolt Brecht

One could forgive audience wariness about an evening of dead babies, gang rape, and the death of civilisations. But Belarus Free Theatre (BFT)'s striking new Young Vic production, *Red Forest*, is an important and potent account of the terrible deeds carried out by humanity against itself. And unlike some other unsettling performances, this one has the advantage of being a) based entirely on fact, and b) rather wonderful. It's also satisfyingly political, in the way theatre ought to be.

It begins with the process. The theatre company set out to document true stories of injustice, largely of the "climate" variety, and in so doing undertook a global research expedition and extensive interview process that informed the work presented here in London. While it's clear that a degree of creative license has been taken, the play's use of the projected faces of interview subjects serves as stark reminder that what we're

seeing is real, happening, and urgent. A quote from playwright Vladimir Shcherban, "We speak on the issues that audience keeps silence on", graces [the BFT website](#).

*Red Forest* benefits hugely from staging, with its innovative combination of music, voice, and movement making for an altogether captivating evening, despite the subject matter. And make no mistake: these stories are tough to take, running the gamut from Chernobyl survivors, to murdered Brazilian oil activists, to Nigerian internally displaced peoples. In the wrong hands, this kind of thing could easily elicit a "curl-up-and-cry" reaction from audiences. Instead, BFT gives us a bed of red sand, framed by two stage-length pools of water, upon which various beautiful, tragic vignettes play out. These are paired with off-stage monologues, based on the stories of those interviewed, and together ensure our eyes remain glued to the stage even in the most disturbing sequences. Of the many fantastic moments throughout, two images stand out in my memory: in the first, the explosion of carefully concealed water balloons proves an imaginative proxy for the blood spilled by an unidentified death squad. In the second, a bundled object – a totemic representation of a child, carried around stage by a grieving mother – is unravelled, revealing a handful of crumbling earth.

These striking scenes inform a politics that, while a notable strength of the production, also represents one of its undeniable weaknesses. If anything, *Red Forest* suffers from being a bit too political. Each story is compelling in its own right, but we're never given quite enough to fully appreciate what's going on. It almost feels as if the understandable desire to share as many testimonies as possible superseded the need for creative rigour. Even as someone relatively up-to-date on the latest human rights controversies, I found myself lost by some of the imagery, which nevertheless remained visually and emotionally potent. To take just one example: while the fate of African migrants to Spain is well-documented, the play's implication that Spanish border guards have taken to raping refugees struck me as bizarre. I welcome more information on on this matter; please feel free to comment below.

As a political moment, it's also a bit disappointing that the piece lacks meaningful engagement outside the performance space. Sure, there's yet another petition to fill out, but if there's anything *Red Forest* – and the activist community – could benefit from, it's more time fleshing out these issues. As it so happens, the performance I attended was indeed followed by a one-off Q&A with a pair of activists, Alexandre de Souza and Joe Corré. This makes it all the more disappointing that none of those who attend other performances will get the opportunity for the same. [De Souza](#) has survived more than 50 attempts on his life as an anti-oil activist in Brazil, while Corré is a fashion guru and eco-activist whose [Let's Talk About Fracking](#) campaign has been picking up steam (pardon the pun) over recent months.

Overall, though, what BFT has put together here is an enthralling, moving, and altogether exciting piece of political theatre. And even if it fails to make an impact here in the UK, it may have already done its work elsewhere. On June 26th, the play was live-streamed to Belarus, where the company has been banned, and its members arrested, over their opposition to the new nuclear plant being built there.

For more on the *Red Forest* project, including video testimonies from those who inspired the play, do take a moment to check out their website at <http://www.belarusfreetheatre.com/productions/redforestcampaign/>

*Red Forest* is being performed at the Young Vic until 5 July 2014. For tickets, see <http://www.youngvic.org/whats-on/red-forest>

[Trailer](#)

---

This entry was posted in [Ecology](#) and tagged [Belarus](#), [Ecology](#), [Environment](#), [Fracking](#), [Review](#), [Theatre](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).