

## Oksana Haiko

# Art that Cuts Deep

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advance.*

### **30.12.2000**

Stuck. Darkness. An existential dead-end, and Shulgan is in the bathroom, he is drunk again. But vodka doesn't help, you don't ever want to drink it anymore. Today is the birthday of the most amazing and wonderful Daniil Kharms. Perhaps my dream will come true and I will produce Kharms' work in my as yet non-existent theatre - won't I?

### **16.01.2001**

How do you get through to these awful people? It seems that if we don't get ourselves into this swamp, no one will. It is scary to look at people on the streets: they are gloomy, focused in on themselves. Passivity, inertia, a disbelief in the possibility of change, interest only in everyday existence, an unwillingness to accept anything new and the already too familiar good-hearted patience of the Belarussian: this is the portrait of our ordinary people. This is a shallow little swamp - or perhaps a deep one - and everyone is in it smelling their own armpits. It would be nice to jump in and enjoy the party with a male striptease! No way! If only a couple of people get off their bums because of our efforts, we can talk of success. Our little urban guerrilla! Am I a naïve idealist? Better still.

### **28.01.2001**

It is hopeless here in terms of people who are able to do anything. Shulgan and I are sitting in the kitchen and creating a list of those who might join us theoretically.

### **5.02.2001**

I hope for the possibility to change at least something around myself. The teenagers here have no clue what to strive for. Some drink, some are becoming idiotic consumers, and those who are trying to find something turn either to the Baptists or to Krishna. If we are able to help at least a couple of people, we can say that there is hope.

### **23.02.2001**



I am up to my ears in books studying theatre. I am getting more and more engrossed. I have to think a lot. I cannot drop what I have started, because if I do death and coldness will prevail. Work, work and work.

### **1.03.2001**

I believe that art must be led by some kind of ideology; perhaps a political ideology. I also think that art must fight against something, for example against the current regime, the dictatorship, against today's fascists; it must help workers, who are as badly educated as they were in the past, it must help them to fight for their rights. Who needs art for art's sake? The art that panders to the lowly animal instincts of the public and to the interests of the fat bureaucrats is disgusting. I want to spit on the commercial art for sale. I am surprised to see people profiting from it. We only want to produce art that cuts deep, art which is a weapon. We know where to go: to the revolution!

### **4.03.2001**

Yesterday we had our first rehearsal at our house. Everything was more difficult than I had imagined. It is very difficult to be a director. We must learn how to trust and not be afraid of each other. Especially us Belarusians - the autistic introverts that we are. Dolgoplov made a scene, he said that I myself don't know what I want, whereas a director must know and foresee everything in advance.

After that rehearsal, it is the second day I am feeling sick.

### **6.03.2001**

Tonight we went to our local theatre: such crap; corpses. It is amazing that the government keeps giving money for these kind of shows. And our poor people watch it endlessly. But there is nothing else on in town. I remember reading somewhere that

underground art is able to reach unbelievable heights during the times when totalitarian regimes fight against it.

### **12.03.2001**

For the 8<sup>th</sup> of March celebrations we organised a theatre happening under the title "March 8<sup>th</sup> - the Day of International Women's Revolution". Our idea was that it is only once a year when everyone suddenly remembers that there are beautiful women around, so they hurry and give women flowers and then get horribly drunk. We simply wanted to get back a sense of a holiday, the true meaning of which has been distorted and abused. The red ribbons, the shawls, the word "comrade", the paper flowers, the verses and a lot of improvisations in the central square: this was the first time out for our theatre group. It's time to think of a name for the company. Vitamin deficiency. Lack of ideas...

Next rehearsal is on Thursday, on the stage of the Society for Deaf People. I am still up to my ears in books.

### **30.03.2001**

We still have no venue. We have settled into a period of waiting. I don't know what to do. My wildly flowering springtime schizophrenia leaves no room for successful visits to offices and weird officials. Shulgan is drinking again. He embarrasses us in front of our new actors.

### **5.04.2001**

Wonderful day! Today was the first rehearsal on the stage of the club at Vul'ka, the stage that in a way is becoming our own. I got the key, now we can even work at night. It is a huge victory! I cannot believe it. I am so afraid of not living up to the gifts of fate, this fear is following me. I am constantly unhappy, constantly looking for something, constantly thinking. I am trying to persuade

myself that nothing ever happens smoothly and beautifully right from the start.

### 10.05.2001

We have sort of figured out the club and the people with whom we're sharing it. There is a discothèque at the weekends and rock-concerts in the same space; in the lobby there are a lot of idle young people drinking and swearing loudly; there are also local rock bands rehearsing in the next room. How come they don't go deaf? There is dust and dirt everywhere. But we are content. No one has hopes for, or relies on, any help.

I think we are able to prove that we can do everything without money, and in fact it is not money that runs our lives.

### 19.06.2001

They want to get rid of us, to kick us out of the club, holding us responsible for everything stolen or damaged in recent weeks. We are told that if anything else happens we will lose our space. We decided to call it a day for a while, simply not to lose this venue.

### 20.08.2001

We are surrounded by people with a slave mentality. We must work hard (and live in such a way) to prove to human beings that no-one runs our lives, but that life itself does, and that a human being can do anything. We must get rid of this slavery bit by bit, like Chekhov.

We must search for utopia in today's world; we must search for some other values, like openness, trust, but not corporate ethics. Because, "nobody is killed until the moment life decides it".

### 28.09.2001

Who needs it except me? How hard, how infinitely hard it all is. If only I could carry this weight by myself. But I don't feel this kind of power within myself. I know so little. I am collecting bits and pieces. But the most



Goods-Money-Goods Photo: Andrej Nekrasov

depressing thing is not to feel that someone somewhere indeed needs it. This is paralysing. Everyone expects something, they say "show us, and we will decide if we want it or not". I keep thinking that perhaps they are right: am I doing something I cannot pull off, am I just lying to myself? The responsibility is enormous, but I am



Bandarouna. Photo: Andrej Nekrasov

weak, ignorant and insecure. This is a vicious circle: I can't do anything without the support of others, but on the other hand, it is only I who can persuade and make them move. What is to be done? And the only support I have is sleeping in the other room deadly drunk.

But enough of this! It is absolutely clear that I cannot dump my group. I would betray everyone who is still expecting something and myself most of all. I would break this almost invisible hope that a large circle of people has, a circle larger than even I can imagine. I would destroy an ephemeral hope that there is an alternative to this idiotic life, and that there is the possibility of going through life without this consumerist attitude. And I know that we're also supporting our friends in Minsk, the friends whose theatre is not doing too well either.

### **23.11.2001**

Nothing is coming together. Slush and mud.

I am seriously thinking of moving to Minsk, to help Pasha and Nastya build their theatre.

### **4.12.2001**

We are doing a workshop in Poznan, with Osmego Dnia (The Theatre of the 8<sup>th</sup> Day). I am suffering a lot when we are asked to do improvisations. I am full of complexes, I feel stupid. But everything that is going on here is a fantastic thing for us: we are entering the realm of theatre.

### **31.12.2001**

Tomorrow is New Year's day. What will this new year bring? Today I am strong and I feel enough power not to lean on anybody. I know what to do.

### **2.02.2002**

Freedom - this is what interests me more than anything. With the help of our company and all our artistic activities, we have an opportunity to search and find freedom for ourselves within the condition of a global lack of liberty. Today the meaning of the word "freedom" is blank and misused, so it takes a lot of effort to understand its true value.

### **6.03.2002**

In two days we will be celebrating our theatre's birthday. I think of inviting everyone in the company to go outside on the streets, and create a happening, a performance. They are pruning the trees in town: this could be our point of departure. We could work on the stencils for graffiti.

### **15.04.2002**

We are having problems with our neighbours. It is not only that they drink all the time, right behind our doors, but also they squat on our patch from time to time and pretend to be the owners. This is their area and therefore it is their club. I am having to deal with it myself and I really don't want to

involve the police. It is simply that we're trying to avoid any contact with the police ourselves, and also here one has to submit to prison-like laws: everything depends on the authority of one person. Plus, we want to stay here for as long as we can.

### **16.04.2002**

I am certain that an actor cannot be a "regular Joe", a person from the street, but at the same time, an actor has no right to separate herself from this crowd.

### **2.06.2002**

*Elizaveta Bam* is near its opening. We are finishing the costumes. We were having a lot of problems with lighting. This absolutely white theatre hall with the plastic ornaments gives us no chance. But we have found a solution: the multicoloured lighting can create a spooky, fairy-tale like atmosphere. True, we cannot hang the light on the ceiling anywhere, but placing them on the floor creates surreal shadows, which only help to evoke the characters of Daniil Kharms' works. The audience will see, of course, our desk lamps instead of footlights on the floor. But our audience is not stupid and it will appreciate that we have produced our performance without a single penny.

### **5.09.2002**

I think I have the right to be in theatre and to make theatre as long as something is bothering me, something pains me from inside. But as soon as it stops, I will have to leave... I will do embroidery, for example, or knit socks.

### **1.11.2002**

The most serious problem and headache right now is finding material for the next show. I really want to react to what is going on now. These events torture me and I can't calm down: terrorists besieged a concert hall

in Moscow. The gassed Chechen women with bombs strapped to their bodies sleep forever in the plush chairs. Ulrike Meinhof; women - terrorists?

### **31.12.2002**

This wonderful year is history. Only Oleg and I are left. The drunkard Shulgan and the irresponsible Alekseev have left us. We are free from squabbles, drunken scenes and the constant fear that someone will frame us. We have got Anya and recently Veta. We are chiselling out a group of people with whom we can really work.

### **8.01.2003**

Do your thing calmly and confidently. Don't fret or panic. This is the point of no return. Besides no one but us will do "our thing" anyway. I am gradually shifting from the topic of terrorism to that of consumerism. In this production, we are going to be concerned with the disgusting manifestations of everyday reality: advertisements, the numbing working day, television, the psychology of the consumer and of the bourgeoisie, a possibility for revolution. "You become human only if you rule out the possibility of any authority over you except for your own free voice."

### **24.03.2003**

There is a war in Iraq. I can't sit still. I am being torn apart. As it turns out for the majority of Belarusians there appears to be no war, the reaction all over the world has gone unnoticed here. A total lack of Embassies, McDonalds and other signs of American presence in the city defeats the purpose of any attempt to express our attitude about the occupation.

### **25.03.2003**

I dream about war already. We are working on a show. We are in such a hurry. We are

searching for symbols at night, drinking vodka. Our friends are participating too. People are gathering...

### **14.04.2003**

We've done it! Everything turned out well, our audience thanked us, some even cried. Everyone who participated is ready to keep on working together; and some new people too. We were so excited to work on this together. We are starting to work on the street performance. No relaxing for us.

### **2.05.2003**

We have organised a very funny and crazy happening on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, in the square during the speeches by the Fathers of the City. This scum have taken away our holiday, turning the celebration of workers fighting for their rights into the day of loyalty and bowing down to the Fathers of the City. But we reclaimed our day by making a drumming and trumpeting procession with fifteen people dressed in bright, coloured costumes and holding banners and balloons. The people dashed to our side enthusiastically to get their free copies of an anarchist newspaper and were obviously waiting for a performance. Then we squeezed in at the end of the official marching pageant right after the cyclists, holding a banner "Liberated Theatre is the theatre for the ordinary people" and drumming like mad. Right in the square, I was pulled aside and had an interesting chat with the police who wanted to take down everything they could about us. Apparently, we have been noticed. But because we hadn't done anything illegal, strangely enough, they could not arrest us. And the most wonderful thing is that young anarchists, who had until now stayed in the shade and didn't know what to do, got organised (there were about ten of them) and decided to continue their collaboration. We are growing!

### **22.05.2003**

We are rehearsing a street performance on the lawn in front of the club. Finally! Local gangsters are taking care of the rowdy teenagers so they leave us alone - the company is working! And they all say "Hi!" to us.

### **31.12.2003**

I am writing this on New Year's eve as usual. I will be brief. When a person is happy, she doesn't want to talk a lot and she can't anyway. How do you express the happiness of being with your beloved? The happiness of this little person kicking you from the inside? The knowledge that soon you will be able to see this marvel? Theatre: we have got Lena, she is wonderful. We are experimenting. I hope to finish the new show before I give birth. There is very little time. But I am hopeful.

### **14.03.2004**

Now we have to have our shows approved by a censorship committee. They did remember our escapade on May 1<sup>st</sup>. The KGB got interested in us. This is all in the light of the latest presidential decrees on ideology, which means that they created a new position of ideological coordinator at the factories and, moreover, students have to join a new version of the Young Communist League, the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union. This conversation between a chick with a big belly and a few executives from the Culture Department was really comical. They had to constantly look aside either because of my belly or because they were just ashamed of their prostitution. We were asked to renounce our convictions, they told us that we posed a threat to the nation (!). They threatened that our next conversation would be at the KGB headquarters. They were reminding us of how much they do for us. They were also telling



Oksana Haiko at a First of May Happening. Photo: Andrej Nekrasov

us about how during the Soviet regime everyone had to have their productions approved by the censorship committee (one of them was a former theatre director); and how all this was healthy and right. They made me tell them in detail about the show we were working on. They ended up advising me to occupy myself with raising my child (this is the most important thing in life after all), and wished me all the best. I hope, my little one inside me, that you heard it all and that you will inherit my hatred for these official scum in suits.

**30.06.2004**

We have done a presentation of *Goods-Money-Goods* for those censoring morons. The top bosses were not there.

V.V. Sokolov gave a lengthy speech (he is a theatre director; it is amazing how many directors we have in our town); he pointed out our numerous mistakes and advised us to cut several scenes (revolution!), but said that the show can be shown to the public. Yes! Thank you and I bow down to you! But we were victorious!

**15.07.2004**

I have been told that the show *cannot* be approved since the chief officials would like to see it with their own eyes. They have to reconvene. And we are, apparently, like circus monkeys who can be made to jump an infinite number of times.

**17.11.2004**

We are touring in Minsk. It seems that we will be performing everywhere except in our hometown. Good for you, Lena, with such a belly, jumping higher than all of us.

### **1.12.2004**

These bloody censors haven't come: they have more important things to do in the town than to see us in our poor club in the sticks. We've decided to perform illegally for the people who have long wanted to see us. This is the last opportunity for Lena, with her five month belly, to perform. We're inviting everyone we can, and the show is announced as a dress rehearsal. If things go like this, we will start calling our performances "open rehearsals". Why not?

### **8.12.2004**

So, a day before the open rehearsal Lena ended up in the hospital. I am unexpectedly taking her place. The show is cancelled, I am a bit frustrated. In a week, I am still going to have to appear on stage. First time in one and a half years; I have to overcome stage fright and insecurity. I am mapping a clear line of my physical actions and working at home every free minute I have. Me on the floor, and my daughter on top of me. I must get through this!

### **21.03.2005**

Crisis: we have worked ourselves to exhaustion with this show, the censorship and so on. We are moving back to working on ourselves, looking for new exercises, and doing endless improvisations. Finally, we must (during improvisation?) find the

moment of truth, find our true selves. And once more find our freedom.

Translated from Belarusian by Yana Meerzon and Dmitri Priven

OKSANA HAIKO (Belarus) was born in 1976. In 2001 Oksana started the Free Theatre, an independent, non-professional, creative association, creating four performances and street happenings as actress and director. Oksana also works for a non-commercial project for children's free education. She has one daughter.