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**World premiere of *King Stakh’s Wild Hunt,* a brand new gothic noir**

**from one of the world’s bravest theatre companies, Belarus Free Theatre**

**Production unites actors, opera singers and musicians from Belarus and Ukraine - with lead roles performed by Ukrainian baritone, Andrei Bondarenko**

**and Ukrainian soprano, Tamara Kalinkina, conducted by Vitali Alekseenok**

**Thursday 14th to Saturday 16th September 2023, Barbican Theatre
Press performance: Friday 15th September at 7.15pm**


Photography by TsvitPaporoty Production

**This September, Belarus Free Theatre (BFT) returns to the Barbican Theatre with the world premiere of *King Stakh’s Wild Hunt****,* **a thrilling gothic noir based on the celebrated Belarusian novel.**

Directed by BFT’s co-founding Artistic Directors,**Nicolai Khalezin and Natalia Kaliada**, *King Stakh’s Wild Hunt* is a conversation between art forms, interlacing opera, theatre, multimedia and live music to tell a story rooted in the history of Belarus with blazing relevance to Europe today and our indifference to brutality.

The production brings together actors, opera singers and musicians from Belarus and Ukraine – many of whom have been forced to flee their homelands due to war or dictatorship. It is the most ambitious artistic venture BFT has ever undertaken as well as being a statement of solidarity between Belarusians and Ukrainians, united in total condemnation of the war in Ukraine.

*King Stakh's Wild Hunt*is one of the most popular novels by the visionary Belarusian writer, Uladzimir Karatkievich. Inspired by Eastern European folklore it follows the ghostly hunt to free a young heiress from an evil curse.

One day in late autumn 1888, Andrey Belaretsky, a young ethnographer, sets out on a journey to the remotest regions of Belarus. Stranded in a storm en route, he is forced to take refuge in the sprawling castle of Marsh Firs, home of the aristocratic Yanouskaya family. There the teenage Nadzeya Yanouskaya tells Andrey that her family has been cursed for twenty generations and that she, as the last in her family line, has all-consuming visions of a sudden and violent death. Andrey agrees to help Nadzeya break free from this ancient curse, but as he begins to unravel the secrets of the Yanouskaya family, he too becomes a target of the Wild Hunt, the murderous spectral figures that stalk the Marsh Firs estate. Andrey must uncover the truth about these otherworldly huntsmen to release Nadzeya from her terrible fate and undo the curse that has marked the noble family for so long.

This world premiere features a transporting score by composer, **Olga Podgaiskaya**, conducted by **Vitali Alekseenok**, Artistic Director of the annual Kharkiv Music Fest in Ukraine, and First Kapellmeister and Deputy Music Director, soon to be Principal Conductor, at the Deutsche Oper am Rhein Düsseldorf/Duisburg. On stage: seven actors from BFT’s permanent ensemble, all exiled from their Belarusian homeland and now living in Poland and the UK; seven on-stage classical musicians from Belarus and Ukraine, known collectively as the Five-Storey Ensemble; and five opera singers from Ukraine – with the lead roles of Andrey Belaretsky and Nadzeya Yanouskaya performed by Ukrainian baritone, **Andrei Bondarenko** and Ukrainian soprano, **Tamara Kalinkina**, respectively.

Andrei Bondarenko won the 2011 BBC Cardiff Singer of the World Competition Song Prize, was awarded a diploma at the New Ukrainian Voices competition and won first prize at the “Art in the 21st Century” international vocal competition in Vorzel, Ukraine; he is currently a member of the Volksoper Wien ensemble. Tamara Kalinkina is lead soloist at The National Opera of Ukraine. She is a passionate advocate for contemporary opera especially those by Ukrainian composers and was awarded the honorary title of Distinguished Artist of Ukraine by the then President Petro Poroshenko in 2018.

*King Stakh's Wild Hunt*is narrated by the late Andrėĭ Kali︠a︡da, father of Natalia Kaliada, and extracts have been taken from the audio book he recorded of Uladzimir Karatkievich’s novel in 2009.

**Director, Natalia Kaliada**, said: *“Since the beginning of Belarus Free Theatre’s existence, my father - Andrėĭ Kali︠ada - talked about the importance of staging* King Stakh’s Wild Hunt *– not just because it’s one of the greatest Belarusian novels of the last century, but because he deeply understood its relevance. 2022 was the year that we finally acted upon his advice. 2022, the year that saw Russia unleash war on Ukraine, killing thousands upon thousands of innocent people. 2022, the year when the crippling occupation of Belarus by Russia really took hold - silently removing all of the Belarusian historians, philosophers and writers from the school curriculum to completely wipe out the Belarusian identity. And 2022, the year when my father died unexpectedly. The authorities raced to his funeral threatening to arrest people, prohibited us to place our white-red-white flag on his coffin, prohibited a service in the Belarusian language…. His death is painful for our family, but metaphorical for our nation. Alongside dedicating this world premiere to the memory of my father, we dedicate it to all of the children and parents who are unable to bury their loved ones as they would wish in their homelands due to dictatorship and war. The Wild Hunt reminds us that the past is not dead, it’s here in Europe today, and we must do everything in our collective powers to stop it in its tracks”.*

**Director, Nicolai Khalezin**, said: *“*King Stakh’s Wild Hunt *is a piercing story that combines mysticism and reality, love and hatred, nobility and cowardice, history and modernity. We wanted to give this amazing story a new tone by combining opera singers with stage actors, classical musicians with new theatrical technologies. Another one of our intentions was to unite some of the talented artists who cannot perform in their homeland today. Uladzimir Karatkievich managed to find his way to the reader even under the communist Soviet regime, weaving truth and relevance into the lines of his novels. History puts everything in its place, and this is exactly what we hope to achieve in* King Stakh’s Wild Hunt*”.*

Described by The New York Times as, *“one of the bravest and most inspired underground troupes on the planet”*, **Belarus Free Theatre** has originated some of the world’s most provocative and breathtakingly physical theatre and is the only theatre company in Europe banned by its government on political grounds. *King Stakh's Wild Hunt* marks BFT’s return to the Barbican following the critically and publicly acclaimed stage production, *Dogs of Europe,* in spring 2022, described as *“unthinkably brave”* (Evening Standard) and *“staggeringly powerful”* (Time Out).

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| **Creative team:** Based on the novel by **Uladzimir Karatkievich****Nicolai Khalezin** Director, Dramaturgy and Original Text Adaptation**Natalia Kaliada** Director**Andrėĭ Kali︠a︡da** Narrator**Vitali Alekseenok** Conductor**Olga Podgaiskaya** Composer **Andrei Khadanovich** Librettist**Maryia Sazonava** Choreography**Andrei Zayats** Fight Director**Nicolai Khalezin** Set Design**Nadya Sayapina** Set Design &Head of Production Design **Anastasiya Ryabova** Costume Design**Lidia Pyshna** Costume Co-Design**Anastasiya Miadzelets-Teush** Mask Design**Peter Small** Lighting Design**Dmytro Guk** Video Design | **Soloists:** **Tamara Kalinkina** Soprano (performing the roles of Nadzeya Yanouskaya & Blue Woman on 15 & 16 September, both at 7:15pm)**Andrei Bondarenko** Baritone (performing the role of Andrey Belaretsky on 15 & 16 September, both at 7:15pm)**Iryna Zhytynska**Mezzo-soprano (performing the role of Andrey/a Svetilovich on 14, 15 & 16 Sept) **Oleksandr Chuvpylo** Tenor (performing the role of Ales Varona on 14, 15 & 16 Sept)**Oleksandr Forkushak** Baritone (performing the role of Gryn Dubatovk on 14, 15 & 16 Sept)***Olena Arbuzova****Soprano (performing the roles of Nadzeya Yanouskaya and Blue Woman on 14 September at 7:15pm & 16September at 1:15pm)****Mykola Hubchuk****Baritone (performing the role of Andrey Belaretsky on 14 Sept at 7:15pm & 16Sept at 1:15pm)***Musicians:****Five-Storey Ensemble****Actors:****Raman Shytsko** (Ryhor)**Maryia Sazonava** (Blue Woman)**Yuliya Shauchuk** (Housekeeper)**Pavel Haradnitski** (Ignas Berman-Gatsevich)**Stanislava Shablinskaya** (Beggar Woman, Little Man)**Siarhei Kvachonak** (Little Man)**Kate Vostrikova** (Pani Kulsha)**Andrei Zayats** ***Daniella Kaliada*** *(in video projections only: Blue Woman, Housekeeper)* |

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| Running time: approx. 2 hours 20 minutes, including intervalAge guidance: 16+ (contains adult themes, violence, loud noise including gun shots and strobe lighting)Performed in Belarusian with English surtitles*King Stakh's Wild Hun*t is a Belarus Free Theatre production, co-commissioned by the Barbican, and supported by Backstage Trust, the Belarusian Council of Culture and GMF (The German Marshall Fund of the United States).Presented by the Barbican with support by the Maria Björnson Memorial FundBook tickets: <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2023/event/belarus-free-theatre-king-stakhs-wild-hunt>Join BFT in-conversation: <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2023/event/belarus-free-theatre-in-conversation> |

*This production of* King Stakh's Wild Hunt *is inspired by conversations with Andrėĭ Kali︠a︡da, and this world premiere is dedicated to his memory.*

*The role of Andrey Belaretsky was written for the Belarusian baritone,**Ilya Silchukou, the former lead soloist at the State Opera Bolshoi in Belarus and one of the country’s best known opera stars. In 2020 he was fired from his role for opposing the fraudulent re-election of Alexander Lukashenko; he now lives in political exile in the USA. Due to personal reasons, Ilya Silchukou will not take up the role for the Barbican world premiere but will accompany the production in its future life.*

**Notes to Editors:**

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**About Belarus Free Theatre:**

Described by The New York Times as, *“one of the bravest and most inspired underground troupes on the planet”*, Belarus Free Theatre (BFT) is the only theatre in Europe banned by its government on political grounds. BFT was founded in 2005, creating, educating and performing theatre in Minsk in the context of Europe's last dictatorship, and forced to operate underground as one of the country’s leading resistance movements. In 2011, following years of intimidation, arrests and imprisonment for making theatre, its co-founding Artistic Directors, Natalia Kaliada and Nicolai Khalezin, were forced to leave Belarus and were granted political asylum in the UK. Soon after, BFT became an Associate Company at London’s Young Vic Theatre, under the Artistic Directorship of David Lan. Over the past eighteen years, BFT has originated some of the world’s most provocative and breathtakingly physical theatre – 50 productions performed in more than 40 countries around the world. BFT’s stage productions have consistently challenged dictatorships, signalled the erosion of democratic rights and freedoms, and called for accountability on the world stage.

Alongside exploding taboos on the world stage, BFT has pioneered an award-winning global model of activism that unites artistic, geopolitical, environmental and human rights concerns, using theatre to build a movement for democracy, human rights and artistic freedoms. In December 2021, BFT was forced to relocate its 16-strong acting ensemble and their family members out of Belarus to safety. The decision was taken in response to the severe risk of reprisals they face as some of the most prominent opponents of the Belarusian regime. Since then, BFT operates between the UK and Poland, creating ambitious stage productions that tour internationally alongside running a theatre laboratory for children and adults displaced by the war in Ukraine. Awards for BFT include: the Magnitsky Prize*,* which recognises work in the field of human rights and anti-corruption (2020); the Human Rights Foundation’s Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent (2018); the Freedom Award, presented by the Atlantic Council at its annual Wroclaw Global Forum (2011); the Human Rights Prize of the French Republic (2007); and The Stage newspaper’s International Award (2021). In June 2023, Natalia Kaliada and Nicolai Khalezin were awarded the Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for Services to Theatre in the King’s Birthday Honours.

**Belarusian conductor Vitali Alekseenok** trained at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and the Weimar University of Music and came to international attention after winning the Arturo Toscanini Conducting Competition in 2021. He is currently First Kapellmeister and Deputy Music Director at the Deutsche Oper am Rhein Düsseldorf/Duisburg and will become their Principal Conductor from the 2024/25 season. He will conduct the world premiere of Manfred Trojahn's *Septembersonate* and the new production of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* in the upcoming season, as well as the dance production of *Surrogate Cities* by Demis Volpi to a composition by Heiner Goebbels. Vitali Alekseenok is the Principal Guest Conductor at the Teatro Massimo Bellini in Catania, where he regularly conducts large symphonic repertoire. He is also the Artistic Director of the annual Kharkiv Music Festival, presenting concerts in bomb shelters, subways and hospitals in Ukraine’s second largest city since the beginning of the war. He conducted the first Ukrainian performance of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* at the National Opera of Ukraine in autumn 2021. Past credits as a conductor and assistant also include: the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, Oper Graz in Austria, Odessa National Opera House, Deutsches Nationaltheater Weimar and State Opera Varna in Bulgaria. He made his debut at Milan’s Teatro alla Scala in the 2022/23 season with the world premiere of the opera, *Il Piccolo Principe*. The Barbican world premiere of *King Stakh's Wild Hunt* is Vitali Alekseenok’s UK debut.

**Composer** and organist, **Olga Podgaiskaya**, was born in Karaganda, Kazakhstan in 1981. Her family moved to Belarus in 1995, and in 2000, she graduated from the Lida College of Music (Musicology). She graduated from the Belarusian State Academy of Music in 2005 (Composition, Organ), received a master's degree the following year (Composition) and in 2008, completed her assistantship (Organ). Olga Podgaiskaya has been the musical director of Kinemo, the festival of contemporary music and silent cinema in Minsk since 2013. She is a member of and the main composer for the Five-Storey Ensemble. In addition to her work as a composer, she is actively involved in concert activities. She is the initiator of numerous events related to contemporary music in Belarus. She is a laureate of international competitions. She has participated in various festivals in Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Czech Republic, Germany, France, Italy, Portugal, Denmark, Canada and others. Olga Podgaiskaya is a Fellow of the Polish Ministry of Culture Gaude Polonia programme (2016, 2022) and finalist of the Envision sound programme for film composers (Kiev, 2019). In 2021 she was in residency at Sasha Walts & guests dance company, and in 2022 participated in the Arvo Pärt Centre Fellowship Programme. She is a member of the Union of Belarusian Composers and the Union of Musicians of Belarus. In 2021, Olga Podgaiskaya moved to Warsaw, Poland. Olga Podgaiskaya writes symphonic and chamber music. She is the author of music for more than twenty silent films and composes for the theatre. The Barbican world premiere of *King Stakh's Wild Hunt* is Olga Podgaiskaya's UK debut.

**Ukrainian baritone, Andrei Bondarenko** is one of the most exciting young baritones of today, having worked extensively with Valery Gergiev, Ivor Bolton, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Vasily Petrenko, Enrique Mazzola, Kirill Karabits, Teodor Currentzis, Emanuelle Villaume, Omer Meir Wellber, Alain Altinoglou, Daniele Callegari, Lorenzo Viotti, Stefano Ranzani, Giacomo Sagripanti, Giampaolo Bisanti, Nick Carter, Ivan Repušic, Dmitry Kitajenko and Cornelius Meister. This 2023/24 season, he will continue in the ensemble of Volksoper Wien, where his repertoire will include La Bohème, La Rondine and La Traviata. He will return to Teatro Massimo di Palermo for his role debut of Kurwenal in Tristan und Isolde and also return to the Glyndebourne Festival to sing the title role in Don Giovanni. Andrei Bondarenko regularly performs at Opernhaus Zürich, Semperoper Dresden, Staatsoper Hamburg, New Israeli Opera Tel Aviv, Palm Beach Opera, Münchner Opernfestspiele, Bayerische Staatsoper, München, Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Scottish Opera, Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, Oper Köln, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Dallas Opera, Oper im Steinbruch St Margarethen, Vilnius City Opera, Israeli Opera, Tel Aviv, Perm Opera, Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg, Perm Opera, Teatro Real de Madrid, Glyndebourne Festival and Touring Opera, Oper Stuttgart. Andrei Bondarenko won the 2011 BBC Cardiff Singer of the World Competition Song Prize, was awarded a diploma at the Ukrainian competition “New Ukrainian Voices” and won first prize at the international vocal competition “Art in the 21st Century” in Vorzel (Ukraine). He was a prize-winner at the 2006 International Rimsky-Korsakov vocal competition in St. Petersburg, the 2008 all-Russian Nadezhda Obukhova Young Vocalists´ Festival and Competition and the 7th International Stanisław Moniuszko Vocal Competition in 2010. Andrei Bondarenko took part in the Salzburg Festival Young Singers Project, returning to the Festival for Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette* with Yannick Nézet-Seguin *and Le rossignol* with Ivor Bolton.

**Ukrainian soprano,** **Tamara Kalinkina** is lead soloist at The National Opera of Ukraine. She graduated from theGliere National Institute of Music in 2005 and the Tchaikovsky National Academy of Music in 2009, both in Kiev. Competitions and Awards include: First Prize in the 2020 Professional Voice Category in Vienna International Music Competition; First Prize in the 2012 Riccardo Zandonai International Voice Competition; and Second Prize in the 2012 Mykola Lysenko International Music Competition in Kiev, Ukraine. In August 2018, she was awarded the honorary title of Distinguished Artist of Ukraine by the then President Petro Poroshenko. Tamara Kalinkina has performed in many of the world’s leading opera houses, with highlights that include the role of Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin* for Polish National Opera; Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*at Teatro San Carlo in Naples; Violetta in *La Traviata*for São Paulo’s Teatro Sergio Cardoso; the title role in *Madame Butterfly* for Estonia’s Teater Vanemuine; and Mimi in *La Bohème* at Bulgaria’s State Opera Stara Zagora. In August 2021,she performed alongside Andrea Bocelli in a concert to mark the 30th anniversary of Ukraine's independence, accompanied by the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine and the Veryovka National Choir of Ukraine led by Maestro Marcello Rota. Tamara Kalinkina will make her UK debut at the Barbican Theatre in the role of Nadzeya Yanouskaya in*King Stakh's Wild Hunt*.

**Andrėĭ Kali︠a︡da** (1940-2022) studied acting at the Belarusian Academy of Dramatic Arts in Minsk. Upon graduation in 1962 he worked in theatre and film before taking up the role of senior lecturer at the Pedagogical University where he trained students in dramatic speech and established the University’s first theatre. Between 1989 and 2000, he was Vice Chancellor of the Belarusian Academy of Dramatic Arts, a period that saw the cultural rebirth of Belarusian language and culture. He translated the Academy’s curriculum from Russian into Belarusian working up to sixteen hours a day; by the end of his tenure, he had translated 65% of it. Andrėĭ Kali︠a︡da was fired from the Academy in 2008 for his association with BFT, the theatre troupe co-founded by his daughter, Natalia Kaliada, and her husband, Nicolai Khalezin. He served as Professor at BFT’s theatre laboratory, Fortinbras, the only independent arts school in Belarus, from 2008 until the end of his life. Andrėĭ Kali︠a︡da was an eminent figure in audio books, recording hundreds of stories in the Belarusian language. He is the narrator of *King Stakh's Wild Hunt;*extracts have been taken from the recording he made of Uladzimir Karatkievich’s novel in 2009.

**About the Barbican:**

The Barbican is a catalyst for creativity, sparking possibilities for artists, audiences, and communities. We showcase the most exciting art from around the world, pushing traditional artistic boundaries to entertain and inspire millions of people, create connections, provoke debate, and reflect the world we live in. We are an international arts and events centre rooted firmly in our own neighbourhood, collaborating with local communities and putting the City of London on the map as a destination for everybody. Central to our purpose is supporting emerging talent and shaping opportunities that will accelerate the next generation of creatives. As a not-for-profit, we rely on the generosity of individuals and organisations, including our principal funder the City of London Corporation. Every ticket purchased, donation made, and pound earned supports our arts and learning programme and enables the widest possible range of people to experience the joy of the arts. Opened in 1982, the Barbican is a unique and audacious building, recognised globally as an architectural icon. As well as our theatres, galleries, concert halls and cinemas, we have a large conservatory with over 1,500 species of plants and trees, a library, conference facilities, public and community spaces, restaurants, bars, and a picturesque lakeside oasis. We are the home of the London Symphony Orchestra, and a London base of the Royal Shakespeare Company. We regularly co-commission, produce and showcase the work of our other partners and associates: the Academy of Ancient Music, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Boy Blue, Britten Sinfonia, Cheek by Jowl, Drum Works, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Serious, and We Are Parable.

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