

ALEKSANDAR NOVAKOVIĆ

1975, Belgrade. Graduated historian and dramatist. At the time being he is at postgraduate theatrical studies at University Of Arts, Belgrade. Novaković is also working on *Development Center Of Performing Arts* archives, being both, it's archivist and creative coordinator.

As a writer and journalist he has published plenty of his works (plays, short stories, poems, screenplays for cartoons) in following newspapers and magazines: »NIN«, »Danas«, »Knjizevni list«, »URB«, »Koraci«, »Lipar«, »Reč«, »Polja«, *Letopis matice srpske*», »Treci trg«, »Etna«, »Znak«, »Povelja«. His plays: *Iza*, *Izlazak-Matrioshka*, *Druga obala*, *Glečer* were published in periodical art magazines.

Plays: »*The System*« (»*Sistem*«, NP Užice, 2001), »*Teeth*« (»*Zubi*«, SNP Novi Sad, 2004)

Book of aphorisms: »*Drink Socrates, The State Pays*« (Matica srpska, Novi Sad, 1998)

Awards: »*Josip Kulundzic*« (2004)-for dramatists, »*Ulaznica*« (2003)-for short story and essay, 2nd prize (2004), *Award of Radio-Belgrade* (2003) for original radio-play, *Politika's Vib's Award* (aphorisms) (the author has refused to accept this award because of *Politika's* »language of hate« in April 2000), »*Belo pero*«-poetry (2004).

Adaptation: »*Stultitiae laus*« (Erasmus Of Rotherdam, DCPA, 2002, Belgrade), »*Downfall-the last act*« (Independent Theatrical Scene *MKC Sistem*, Belgrade, 2003)

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RAZVOJNI CENTAR IZVODJACKIH UMETNOSTI  DEVELOPING CENTER of PERFORMING ARTS

ALEKSANDAR NOVAKOVIĆ

THE SYSTEM

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Characters:

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Oswald Peipus, early 50es, chief of Secret Service of Latalia

Hal Remius, student, mid-twenties

Place and time:

Imaginary baltic republic Latalia at the height of authoritarian regime

Time:

maybe even while you read this

SCENE ONE

Hightened platform on the scene, black colour. White chair on the top of it. Doors are placed in the bottom of the platform. Three reflectors around the platform, blackness and nothing more. OSWALD PEIPUS enters the stage. Peipus is in his early fifties, elegant, chief of State Security of Republic of Latalia. HAL REMIUS follows, mid-twenties, beaten, bloody, wearing worn out sweater and jeans)

OP: Hmm, common face. I know you so well although you don't want to know for me. (offering a cigarette. Hal refuses): Ah, non-smoker. Wise. You will live longer, Mr. Remius. (Pause) Are you trying to look wise? Looking wise is smart thing to do, unless it doesn't originate from insanity and you have shown yours abundantly clear! Oh, you are one nervous young man, aren't you? Maybe you dislike this cliché? Don't you understand that our lives have turned into clichés long ago? Anyway, there are some good clichés in life and this is one of them.

HR; Villain drags his victim into his hole, explains to him, sadistically, anatomy of his crime before he executes him. Is that so, Mr. Peipus?

OP: Villain? Who is the villain here, you or me? Who is convict?

HR: Why did you bring me here?

OP: Well, you will certainly agree that this atmosphere is much more suitable

HR : This is not...

OP : As a chief of secret service I have the jurisdiction of the highest rank to order execution of persons whose deeds and undeedes are threat for the interest of state and these extreme measures I have to use in these extremelly difficult times.

HR: These »difficult times« last for pastten years. Martial law and carefew. Nice!

OP: I see that you need a digest lecture from geopolitics. This is our country, Latalia, Republic of Latalia, one of four Baltic republics. Twenty thousand square kilometers of dispair!

HR: It's good that we are using metric system because if we were using square miles instead, our country could seem smaller.

OP : So, twenty thousand square kilometers, population only two milion, half a milion of the-bloodthursty Kuchlats, bearing Tatarian herritage. Russia, on the east, wants to hug us again, in its reckless bear-like way. On the other side, NATO has already sprang his fangs to the neighbouring countries. latalia is overflown with soo-called oposition, terrorists are making our lives miserable and you have the nerve to ask me whether we need martial law? Oh, we need red alert, we need alert which is more red than red alert!

HR: That red alert is a make-believe.

OP: Maybe so, but, as you know, it is very usefull make-believe.

HR: Listen, you are tired, I am tired, I cant persuade you to change your beliefs and you can't persuade me either with your so called truth.

OP: Truth? What is the truth?

HR: Funny, Pylatus asked Christ the very same question.

OP: So, now you are Chrisdt and I am Pylatus?

HR: No. Pylatus had had second tho0ught about killing someone.ž

OP: Pylatus was desk clerk who was scared to death. I know that you mustn't prospone the murder and that knowledge kept me alive in career as well as in life.

HR: How many lives did your »career« cost?

OP: With or without yours? What a hipocrisy!

HR: Hipocrisy? Hipocrisy is to see crumb in someone's eye not seeing timber in your own.

OP: Mr. Varda was just a crumb for you?

HR: No, he was, while he was alive, a big rotten timber and timber he is, boiling in the hell for past few days.

OP: Hehehehe! Funny. No surprise that I didn't order your execution. You assassins, you are such an interesting folk. Unfortunately, I have not met one yet.

HR: I thought you had them enough in your service.

OP: Oh, no. They are not assassins. Not for me, at least. They are more like cleaners, streetsweepers. They are cleansing our homeland, destroying moral, spiritual and political filth.

HR: Your "cleaners" are leaving spots behind them. Bloody ones!

OP: They are leaving bloody traces because of impression. You know, our people could never believe in Stalin's cleansings. Stalin had operated in discrete, sterile manner, a man disappears and that's it! Bloody spot that remains effects much more on the consciousness of those dreaming of revolt. Assassin seems so old fashioned, out of date. PAM! DEAD! Are you an anarchist?

HR: No. Disappointed?

OP: Pretty much so.

HR: Gosh, excuse me!

OP: Insane decisions are good if they give you back your good reason.

HR: Insanity? I'm not the one who is insane here.

OP: And how do you call man who has laid his hand on his president, Mr. Varda?

HR: If he is so-called President he certainly isn't our Father, God Almighty.

OP: Enough! For you and me, here, in this damned rattlesnake shack, in this asshole of fear, in this living hell, president is God and father and Lucifer himself. Only a mad man can dare to shoot from a twenty paces distance and then surrender himself.

HR: You don't care about President. It's your position that you care about.

OP: True. Among other things. But, don't forget, I am taking care of system which is embodied within the President, the very same system that will survive without President as well as it shall survive without you.

HR: The man who doesn't know what the freedom is doesn't know what sacrifice he has to make for it.

OP: Freedom is the prison, the greatest prison of all! You are strange man, Mr. Remius. I bet that you were preparing for a long time for this conversation, making plots in your little stinking cell. I am sure of it! These are the works of megalomaniacs who are willing to die with great words on their lips. Like

someone's going to remember their petty words and print them in history books on that blessed day when arrieves democracy, freedom, liberal capitalism, social-democraqts and demo-christians, greenies and little greenies from the Mars! Nothing of it will happen, my dear Hal! The only two persons aware of this are you and me!

HR: President is dead. I shot him!

OP: Maybe. Isn't that funny-you have approached him easily, without any help?

HR: I approached him because ground around residence wasn't guarded.

OP: Doubt! There it goes! Doubt is the strongest vehicle for opening of horizons and crumbling od ideals. Residence wasn't defended because there was no need for that. From the very beginning of his career we were aware that anyone could kill him, if that someone wanted that. There was no real danger from anyone but from you, lone gunman! Self righteous individuals, common, with no criminal record, they can't be tipped off because, for Heaven's sake, they are guilty, and they alone, for their horrors. But, we have police recorsd any citizen, guilty or not, beecause, in the end, we all mak mistakes, we all sin. (Pause) Anyway, that's irrelevant for you-you have just bumped in like elephant into glass store and ruined everything!

HR: I am glad to see you, lost and headless, now, being without your precious leader.

OP: Tell me one thing: did you hear another shot while pulling the trigger?

HR: can't recall.

OP: Didd you see President after pulling the trigger?

HR: For a second. He bounced and fell.

OP: Is that so? You can't say whether he was dead or not?

HR: He probably was.

OP: So, you can't be sure of killing him?

HR: Maybe he didn't die instantly. Maybe he died on the way to hospital.

OP: Quite so. But, there are other possibilities. Confused? Im sad to spoil your picture of you on the great trial, being myrtyr sacrificing for his n nation and liberty, and then, who knows, maybe they bail you out and form Governmentr of National Unity with you as prime ministre!

HR: Wrong! I have expecte4d death, nothing else.

OP: It's a lie! Everyone wants to start up the revoulution and take part in it. I f they survive all this, of course.

HR: You are wrong. Death was only thig I expected.

OR: Everyone!

HR: Exclude me.

OP: You will be excluded from the list of both living and dead, excluded from history and anthropology. When we finish with you we will systematically ruin all the traces of your so called life: your tatters and rags from Oak Street 36, few friends and newest-latest mistress. There will be no one to mention Hal Remius, maybe killer-maybe not.

(Hal throws himself on Oswald and he avoids his attack and presses him on the ground with ease. Pause)

OP: Duty calls. I'll be back.

HR: You fucking monster!

OP: I'll take this as a compliment.

(Oswald is leaving. Dark)

SCENE TWO

(Oswald enters. Remius is on the floor, gets up, slowly, aching and places himself on the chair)

OP: I have caught all opposition leaders! They think that it is enough to kill President and who system will collapse like a tower made of playing cards. If I could spare you some more of my time I would bring all your "friends" right here. I guarantee that they will spit in your face and denounce you! Who knows, maybe they could shoot you, just to save their unworthy asses! Why are you so sad? I will kill only you and that's where the story ends. Sapienti satis! You have a word of chief of State Security of Republic of Latalia. I am the only person in this from God forbidden land who keeps his promise: When I promise that someone will be killed I do so and vice versa. The second one is quite rare but, who knows? I guess it is part of our mentality: us, Latalians, are ill tempered people, quick, hasty, but we have warm heart and broad mind. (Pause) You are too grim to be in my company.

HR: Ain't it funny that you talk with me so much?

OP: What are you hopin for? Media, TV, press? Newspapers are slow and, even they were faster, only few people read them. All TV stations are right now giving reports of state TV. I guarantee that first words of speaker of independent TV KBC will be: "Despite great grief and despair because of Mr. President's death..."

SPEAKER(OFF): "Despite great grief and despair because of Mr. President's death, Temporary Council, basing its decision on legal rights, had accepted to stir fatherland's ship. Hence, batalion of anti-terrorist forces was already sent in flaming Kuchlatia..."

HR: You want to rule? It is ridiculous!

OP: Who else? You? You are still student, manual labourer making his ends meet, without any knowledge about political life and life in general! Let's say that one day democracy arrives. Picture free elections. Who has better chances to win-me, Eaton graduate in psychology, me, the one who knows where the devil sleeps or you, frustrated student?

HR: I am frustrated because the University is closed.

OP: So what? National Universities belong to the past. Why didn't you educate abroad?

HR: Why should I? This is my land!

OP: O, villain can be patriot! Who could guess that?

HR: You are the worst villain! Educated, enlightened, connoisseur of human spirit. Yet, what do you do with all that knowledge? You turn truth into lie, benevolence into crime and nation, turning into vampires during your rule, believes your words because you are man of honour. You torture and abuse in the name of the nation you hate!

OP: If there was no nation there wouldn't be me.

HR: Get out of my country!

OP: Wow! Patriot indeed! Assassin with motive! No fooling! There are no sacred ideals, Hal, only hunger and nothing more.

HR: What about the people? Do you think they would really tolerate your actions?

OP: In primitive brains of those androgenous baboons lies a fact that they are starving today but there is no information about their starvation the day before and, furthermore, they have no clue that they will be hungry tomorrow. If you put the things that way, no one will remember what happened one, nine or ten years ago.

HR: Someone will remember. Or recall.

OP: Who? Newspapers, writing day-to-day use articles? Nation is peaceful, mumbling, groaning but wearing his burden, not seeing their Messiah who is hidden by our Messiah, using thin veil of so-called democracy. This is good tactics. Do you see the beauty of the system? Lots of barkin-but there is no change.

HR: I've seen your bloody democracy on the streets, in the jails. You can't hurt us, you can't hurt people like Artoris was!

OP: Old Artoris, old Artoris, I'm sick of that scribbler! Artoris entered the legend because he tore off his shirt in front of my cleaners and ordered them to shoot. But, there is a one it'sy bitsy little fact. Old

Artoris tipped his friends for small change and now, when his clock had hit midnight⁵, he plays the hero from the very same reason you shot the President. Its all »vanitas vanitatis«, nothing more.

HR: Execute me and finish this sharade at once.

OP: So young and, yet, dying to die. Ts-ts-ts! You consider me for evil yet interesting perso, ellegant Prince Of darkness!

HR: You mean Prince Of Dorkness?

OP: No parents, huh? No relatives? Right? You are, as they say, child of love, gift from God, snapper, bastard! Yes! That's the word! Bleeding bastard!(Pause) You have fought for your life more than anyone else.If I were you it would be difficult for me to die. (Pause)Cheap, pretty cheap. You are avoiding conversation,sonny, I mean Remius, you are avoding conversation to make me suffer! Petty punnishment! Why did you shoot?

HR: Did you just say I killed Varda?

OP: I didn't say that you did or did not kill him, I am just saying that you attacked him.

HR: It seemed like a good idea at the time.

OP: And now it isn't?

HR: Now, lookin' at you, all mixed up, I am starting to realise that it wasn't a good idea. It was a fantastic idea! Your thorne is rocking and your role of Big Brother is near the end. You won't wait for curtain to fall for a long time.

OP: Leader, throne? I am serving to people of Latalia and that's it.

HR: I have knocked the top of pyramid and rest of it will follow!Right into the dust where it belongs!

OP: You have forgotten the system Hal, system!

HR: Dictatorship you mean?

OP: Democracy isnt for our people because, if it was, it wouldn't be passing it by so long. Democracy is made for flegmatic entreprenours like Anglo-Saxons.not for tribes of half-animals in this from God frobidden Hyperborea. Our nation needs simple man, common, ruthless yet just...General, colonel, something like that. You know, I have so much to do: long war with Kuchlats, truce, renewal and rebuilding of country because, after this chaos, every day will look better than the previous one. People are so unreasonable-they have to pay if they want to enjoy the peace!

HR: I have shot the wrong man!

OP: Im my opinion maybe you have shot the right one! What? You can't tell truth from lie? Why are you here? Attempt of murder, murder or, simply, job undone? Think of people. What would they say if

they see you in the court? Their countryman? Anyone can shoot President, this one, and that one afterwards and that one after him... There must be certain order!

HR: Order, labour and discipline!

OP: »Dura lex sed lex!« Small nations must be filtered up in order to protect themselves.

HR: Your words stink of holocaust.

OP: Not at all! I have killed few hundreds out of two milion! Few hundred-that much dies in car accidents every year! God only knows how many people live without any reason. Anyway, all those people are irrelevant.

HR: If that so why did you murder them?

OP: They were important enopugh to be executed. That's their greatest success.If you could only see these sons and daughters of freedom, crying, begging for mercy, denouncing their kin. I was signing death sentences, filled with discust. None of them was a human being for me. They faltered because they were »just a people«! Look at you, for example!

HR: What about me?

OP: You are nop excuse either. In fact, I deon't know what are you like, my son.(Pause) You are not a typical e4xample, that's for sure. Nox one is behind or in front of you. Your motive is clear as a day. You have nothing to lose anymore!

HR: There are thousands of use and your days are numbered!

OP: Is that so? I know just about one man.

HR: Nothing to worry. You will hear of them. The beauty of system is, and I quote you, that you created us and you will continue creating us every day of your damn rule untill you disappear into the thin air!Utterly!

(Oswald slaps Hal's face)

OP: I shall not give you the power. You are denying us as human beings, you, young and righteous, smart and beautiful! Hope of this land, »our youth«! You want it now and you want it all!Ain't gonna happen! For thousand years we have draggedn on our back Teutonians, Tatarians and Russians and that burden is something we really deserve!

HR: How can you talk about people, land, humanity? You love no one!

OP: I've loved many women, far more than you, rebel. Who knows, maybe Freud was right about you? Maybe sex is the root of your political discontent? Hmmm!

HR: I've heard that power is powwerfull aşphrodisiac but I didn't know that it helps old farts like you.

OP: Stop it if you don't want to be torchured!

HR: Well, considering the tone of our conversation I don't have any objections. Where is iron maiden?

OP: What about electrocuting?

HR: You are 100% villain!

OP: Cr5iminal, that's what I am but, at least, I am not false puritan condemning crime in the name of state. Killing legal and legitimate president is OK?By what law? Pacifists would haver shot xou for this! Pacifists, no less!Who knows, if you were smart like you weren't, you could be patient, organize movement, party, coalition and win the elections without a bullet shot.

HR: We have gained this power with blood and without blood we wouldn't decay! These are Varda's words!

OP: It's Shaespeare's fault: »Bloody was your beginning, bloody your and shall be!« Richard The Third,what a piece! Im said he didn't make it!

HR: I would like to see the day when the world will find out about your crimes.

OP: Pure fiction! I am not O'Brian, you are not Winston Smith andf this play we are in ain't deffinitely Orwel's 1984. We just govern the state, that's all!

HR: Your government is a perfect crimwe. Everyone knows wghio the killer is but no one goes to police because killer is the police.

OP: No, that's a double sinn off weak people being silent, fearing for his own ass,torturing itself as well as sinn of your kind, humanists,democrats and religious ones, doing the same thing I do but not willing to admitt it. We are beasts, you and I. Question is which one is stronger, that's all!

HR: Where is your son, Oswald?

SCENE THREE

(Peipus and remisu staring at each other)

HR: Did you drown him, cut him, poison him, shread him into pieces, torture him with electroshocks?Are you hurting,huh? Showing feelings at last? It didn't hurt to threat me with lives of my friends or watching me, half-mad, staring at the dark, praying for their quick and painless death? You didn't seem to show interest in me, blaming myself for their death.How do you think I felt at that time? You don't know and you don't wanna know but, at least, you owe me one explanation!

OP: I don't owe you nothing but hot led!

HR: You owe them only sencere moments in your life.

OP: Even if I tel you the truth, what do you have?

HR: I will know that you are, at least a bit, a human being.

OP: I am going to kill you,you know.

HR: That's your problem, not mine.

OP: Looking at you...

(Oswald turns away)

HR: Running away?

OP: Not at all. Peer...

HR: Yes?

OP: When I transferred from KGB to latalia everyone was suspicious. They needed an expert, but one without reputation of Soviet executor.All those firemen and constables, nationalsits, they were so lasy and witoht any system whatsoever. The bbest qualification they had was that they didn't serve Sovie4ts. Anyway, bit by bit, >i becam one of the heads of Service, although constantly controlled by Internal Control. Once with Ruskies-always with Ruskies, they said.They were serving them too, I know. Who didn't? So, I started doing my new job,winning their confidence. And so, I was carying my documents home, confidential ones. But, informations started to lee. One of my men, Larson, was killed because of wrong tip. They burried him as a hero afterwards. Informations kept leaking. One night I went to sleep, leaving documentas on the table.I woke in the middle of the night. From my room I ve seen weak,shimmering light nd I approached. My son, PEER, was photographing documents, Without hesitation,I called Parvius, one of my best men. They arrived in ten minutes. They gave him naqtrium-penthatol.

HR: Truth serum?

OP: Yes. He admitted everything. He worked for Russians, »like pop in the old days« he said. He believed in nothing. Revenge, that's whatr itz was, no faith!he didn't know for anytihing else, just revenge!Remember,Pe..., Hal, what I told y<ou, hunger, that's all!That serum is awful: once you start running the truth you cant just press the button with stop on it. When he saw me, stoned like he was, he spat me! He said I was lousy father, professional murderer, that I threw his mother into the grave but I swear I didn't do it!They had everything with me but he betrayed his country anyway, bloody bastard!

HR: Betraying you,you mean?

OP: Both me and country. He was negotiating us, like you. You dream of us dying all at once and then building an ew brave world of yours. Do you know what I did? NO, I didn't sacrifice him bbecause of

my position. It was euthanasia, coup de grace, that's what it was! He was young, about your age, he even looked a lot like... For a second time, can't believe it. (Pause) And so, I told my men to do it as painlessly as they can and they gave him cyanid and, few seconds later, it was all over. Later they made it look like a car accident.

HR: How did you hush up the whole affair?

OP: I did not. Yerolimus Back, head of the Service, at the time, had plans for coup d' etat. I have traced his contacts, informed Varda, Back was arrested, executed...

HR: And burried like a hero.

OP: Exactly. One week later I became the chief.

HR: This is how it works: you can't be loyal to your family and Service at the same time.

OP: Stop fucking with me!

HR: Or what? You are going to kill me?

OP: Since the day Peer was murdered I am no longer a man. Afterwards I didn't care-five, ten, hundred, no hesitation, pity, nothing. So, ten years of my non-existance had passed and neither devil nor God have any interest in me. This is the best proof I am not interesting for them. You see, countries, serviecs, Russia, Latalia, everything was changing even my wife was forgotten but son... Peer didn't want to be saved because he was lost with the simple fact that he was my son. It took two lives to extinguish to figure out what I have done! That's the only crime I admit! You know who you are?

HR: Who?

OP: The toughest investigator I ever met. You took it5 out from me, with no effort whatsoever and now, you are leaving with your truth but w whome with I stay?

HR: Oswald, tell me.

OP: Don't think so high of yourself.

HR: oswald, tell me.

OP: Yes?

HR: Did I kill Varda?

OP: Maybe...

HR: You are stopping, just like that?

OP: For a second time.

(Pause)

OP: It's all been said and done. Your journey is waiting for you.

HR: Promise me that you will tell the truth, someday, to anyone.

OP: Rauph Bukhaev, kuchlatian terrorist, was executed this morning being guilty for betrayal, terroirsm and murder of President Antanas Varda.

HR: The real truth, Oswald, the real truth!

OP: When your time arrives.

HR: When better time arrives.

(Hal is leaving, Oswald is still sitting in his chair. He is not looking after Hal. He is broken. Dark)

SCENE FOUR

(Same scene. Oswald is broken, voice of judge, off)

JUDGE(off): Oswald Peipus, do you plead guilty for giving order for execution of 545 citizens, being a director Secret Service of Latalia....

OP: 546, your honour, 546. No, I don't feel guilty. There was no other way.

(Dark. The end)

This play, directed by Stefan Džeparoski, was first time staged on march 13th 2001. in National theatre Užice, Serbia. Cast :

OSWALD PEIPUS-Slobodan Ljubičić

HAL REMIUS-Vahidin Prelić

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