

# Black-and-white war monologues stir hearts

As a schoolboy, I had to write about how I had spent my summer. Those were golden days filled with sunbathing, making friends, dancing, swimming and playing ball... Of course, anyone who lived through the fiery war years — like the characters in Svetlana Alexievich's *Last Witnesses* — will feel differently. Minsk director Vladimir Savitsky recently staged the play for Vitebsk audiences

By Sergey Golesnik

...The stage is full of elderly people who are asked to write a composition on how they spent their childhood. People's Artistes Tadeus Koksztys, Svetlana Okruzhnaya, and other experienced actors deliver monologues, speaking as 7-10 year old children who have witnessed torture and suffering. These war recollections are especially touching. Additionally, a real child's voice sings the warm-hearted, tranquil song *Venus Star*. It acts in discord against the stories of the main characters — confirming to us that childhood and war are two absolutely incompatible notions.

Svetlana Alexievich's books have been published in over 20 countries and have served as the basis for documentaries and theatrical perform-

ances. Among them are *The Unwomanly Face of the War* and *Zinky Boys*. Her *Last Witnesses: the Book of Unchildlike Stories* is being staged for the first time. According to Mr. Savitsky, the story's passage to the stage was far from easy. "I initially read the book on the Internet, which has much more material than in its paper version. My first impression was shock! I thought I'd go mad. It's impossible to invent all these horrors. Knowing that it was the complete truth made me feel quite sick. I put the book aside for a while before returning to it. Finally, I decided to stage it," he says.

The performance was initially to be premiered at the Yanka Kupala Theatre, where Mr. Savitsky works as its director-producer. Last year, he entered the script in a Culture Ministry contest dedicated to the



Shrill monologues on war sound on Vitebsk stage

65th anniversary of Belarus' liberation and won. Later, after reading twenty monologues (of over a hundred in the electronic version), he realised that most of the stories centred around Vitebsk forests and the Zapadnaya Dvina River — where the fascists sank innocent people. He then had the idea of performing at the Vitebsk Yakub Kolas Drama Theatre, where Mr. Savitsky recently staged his musical comedy *Whifflers*.

"In *Whifflers*, we used mostly young actors. Now, I'm asking, 'What can I teach Honoured Artists of Belarus Valentina Petrachkova, who joined a guerrilla regiment as a child and saw everything her char-

acter is speaking of with her own eyes?" All of the actors have treated this complicated material carefully and reverently. It's impossible to hide behind theatrical displays or jokes; the stage is decorated exclusively in black and white — we see the actors as they are," Mr. Savitsky asserts.

It's impossible to paraphrase the plot of the story — since there is none. We simply have 20 childish stories, each a cameo which explores a penetrating issue. We are pushed to think. For instance, the play asks us to consider whether we remember everything or whether our minds selectively 'erase'. "A whole generation of children and teenagers faced awful suffering during the Great Pa-

triotic War. How could they remain unaffected?" wonders Mr. Savitsky. "How could they write poetry, give birth to children or sing songs having enduring such emotional torture? It seems impossible! However, they managed to survive, using their own inner will."

Mr. Savitsky admits that, this time, he has created a 'theatre of questions'. Like his artistic team, he is interested in hearing answers — including from Vitebsk veterans. The latter were invited to the premiere as honourable guests.

Minsk is to host the performance in September, as part of the Vitebsk Yakub Kolas Drama Theatre troupe's tour.

# Who is Alice?

Even Chris Norman has no answer to this question

In Soviet times, it was impossible to dream of seeing the famous English *Smokie* band singing live. They didn't even appear on TV. Meanwhile, abroad, the young, hot-tempered guys filled stadiums with fans and topped musical hit-lists. Glam-rock arrived many years later...

English Chris Norman — a legendary *Smokie* founder — was brought up in the best traditions of rock'n'roll and Beatles-mania. He recently visited Minsk to perform at Mir Castle. The singer admits that he has not lost his authority in the musical world. In the past, he sang with Suzi Quatro, recorded albums with Dieter Bohlen and drove Jaguar and Porsche cars.

**Mr. Norman, how do you like Minsk?**

*This is not my first time in Minsk. I first came here 15 years ago. I must admit that the city has changed tremendously in these years. I'm now even thinking of spending several days here — to study the changes you've made in detail.*

**You'll be pleasantly surprised. Your *What Can I Do* is still performed at our restau-**

**rants. Which song would you choose to 'bombard' the musical hit parade? Is it enough to have one hit?**

*I doubt it. Even in the remote 1970s, when 'Smokie' seriously made a name for itself, it was not enough to have one popular song. You needed to always be recording new songs. Eventually, we recorded 5-6 'strong' hits — and everything was, at last, working out for the best. We felt confident. We had around 15 top songs in our repertoire — with others of minor importance. Naturally, in our modern times, it's impossible to move on with a single well-promoted song; constant advancement is vital. This is a hard job — believe me.*

**The film about *Smokie* — shot many years ago — added to the band's popularity. Would you like to repeat the experience — to make a film or stage a musical?**

*I would be keen if someone suggested an interesting idea. The problem is that there are few really good proposals. An acquaintance once invited me to give a performance based on our 'Living Next Door to Alice' song. I think the idea is not bad but it's too early to speak about its imple-*

*mentation.*

**This is one of the most popular songs in the CIS. Was Alice a real person or was she invented?**

*It's difficult to answer, since the song wasn't written by me, but by Nicky Chinn and Mike Chapman. Amusingly, I've never asked them who Alice is. I'll find out now for sure — but I'd imagine she's invented.*

**Do you ever write about real people in your own compositions?**

*Yes. I quite often describe a situation from my life or tell of my acquaintances.*

**Your children are also trying for a career in music. Do you dissuade them?**

*No. I fully support them. In my childhood, I was also surrounded by music [Norman's parents were professional dancers — author]. In my house, you'll find guitars, keyboards, drums and, even, a recording studio. It's unsurprising that my children are keen on music. My daughter sings, one son plays the guitar and the other is a drummer. They are just at the start of their paths — but let them try! I believe that they must love music to achieve success. Many years*



ALEXANDER RUIZHECHKA

Sentimental Chris Norman

*ago, the band and I were passionate about music. When you know what you want and have a clear goal, you strive to achieve it. You should go straight ahead: compose songs, record them, give live concerts. I assist my children with pleasure; we've recorded several joint compositions in my studio. Who knows how far they could go if they have hits and a good show.*

**Robin Gibb, from *Bee Gees*, recently visited Minsk and gave a concert. You are all most neighbours, both living on the Isle of Man...**

*Yes, Robin's house is about twenty minutes from mine by car.*

**Are you on friendly terms?**

*Not really. Actually, I don't think Robin comes to the island very often — he spends most of his time in America. Sadly, I also spend little time at home — not as much as I would wish.*

**What are you like at home?**

*I'm calm. In my spare time, I love to read or sleep. I often go walking and sometimes jog. As I get older, I'm becoming more sentimental. I can be moved to tears by a film. I spend quite a lot of time alone, sitting in my studio, selecting songs for discs. I don't have any desire to go on holiday and relax, as I can't lie idle for long. It's easier for me to relax and think of lofty things at home.*

By Lyubov Vertinskaya

# 'I'm a fortress, I'm fighting...'

By Zhanna Kolesnikova

**Shooting of *Brest Fortress* feature film begins at citadel over River Bug**

The creators of the film note that the *Brest Fortress* project is the most complex in terms of production, with major sets constructed especially for the film. Cardboard 'brick' walls have appeared in the citadel, alongside a club and a bridge — destroyed during military fighting. The film's special effects are being taken care of by a crew of around 70 people on the Belarusian side and almost the same number from Russia.

*Brest Fortress* looks set to premiere by Victory Day next year. Director Alexander Kott tells us that the picture has been designed as a full-length film, reconstructing true events and starring true heroes — the Brest Fortress defenders. The film is being overseen by the Union State's Television and Radio Broadcasting Organisation.