

We're fine as we are.

Lion Novogonov

When Prince Hamlet said all of Denmark was a prison this dealt a blow to our national pride.

Even more hurtful, the insult is repeated every evening on the stages of theatres worldwide.

No laughing matter. Here is a question of principle. Every man should decide his allegiance: are you with Hamlet, or with Russia?
avec qui on est: avec Hamlet ou avec la Russie?

With Popov or Marconi? With Watt the Englishman, or our Russian brothers the Cherepanovs?

Did Radishchev, Chernyshevsky, Dostoevsky, Lenin, Stalin, Korolyov and Solzhenitsyn (the list is endless) serve their sentences in vain, was it for nothing our greatest poets Pushkin and Brodsky went into internal exile if some Danish prince dared to challenge Russia's priority as a jailer?!

Empty words Mr Hamlet, our President would say.

He has a propensity for prison jargon and maybe this is no coincidence.

Let us turn aside from the President and speak of a far more humble but no less interesting figure. The dramatist Mikhail Volokhov, and his new play *Paris Bound*, staged by Mikhail Salov and performed by Salov and Dmitri Petukhov.

Who do you think are the main, to all intents and purposes the only, heroes of this play?

Three guesses. You got it: convicts. The prize is yours.

Some of you may say: 'So what... The artistic imagination – his choice is dictated by flight of imagination.'

To that I say: here is no fancy or flight of imagination, but a conscious act of great civic significance.

Our reply to Hamlet! A jab in Mr Shakespeare's soft rump.

The plot of this play centres around two convicts, two Russian Hamlets fleeing to Paris on the roof of a goods wagon.

Being Hamlets, they start philosophising.

Philosophising in the first language of this science of sciences – in the language of poetry, thickly spiked with the vilest obscenities, very much in the spirit of our times:

nowadays emotions that tear the human soul apart are intense as the mysterious obscurity of surrounding reality, words simply fail us.

Escape to Paris is another Russian theme from way back.

Whether we escape from the drudgery of lessons at school or repeated nagging from the wife, the place we flee to is always a Paris of one kind or another – the squalid Paris of Moscow casinos, the hallucinogenic Paris of substance abusers or a tourist paradise – we save our pennies for a week's trip to the capital of the average-income Russian bourgeois.

But Paris always remains Paris because it is essentially unobtainable. Otherwise what is Paris?

Jail isn't jail if you can escape from it.

It has nothing to do with impenetrable bars and vigilant guards.

We take it with us wherever we go, the way a snail carries its shell.

Even if the prison gates are ajar for some conditional historical period, the majority of our citizens never think of escaping.

It's logical – there's no point in escaping if you return there anyway.

Pushkin's image of 'a slave worn out long ago but dreaming of escape' is no more than a figure of speech.

All our discussions, all our words are merely idle chatter.

Time to bring this discourse to an end. Another ration of macaroni is being doled out here in prison.

We're fine as we are. The audience laughs so hard the chandeliers come down.

Regards to Mr Khodorkovsky!