



*All images from I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine. 2008.
Photographs by John Hodgkiss.*

I Am Not Me, The Horse Is Not Mine*

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

*Stage: approximately 6m wide by 3m deep.
A blank projection surface behind the stage.
A ladder on wheels.
A glass of water on the ladder.
A sheaf of lecture notes on the ladder.
The lecturer (WK) paces back and forth across the stage.
He looks into the wings stage right and left.
Projection of blank studio wall.
House lights off.
Title I AM NOT ME, THE HORSE IS NOT MINE appears onscreen.
WK steps into the center of the stage.*

WK: For the last while I have been working on a project related to the short story *The Nose*, written by the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol in 1837, which was translated into an opera by the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich in 1928.

The story and the opera recount the history of one Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov, who wakes one morning, and finds his nose gone. Kovalyov is a bureaucrat; his rank of Collegiate Assessor is about one third of the way up the hierarchy of Russian officials.

But the story starts with his barber, Ivan Yakovlevich. Ivan Yakovlevich wakes one morning, and in the loaf of bread that his wife gives him for breakfast, he discovers a piece of gristle. To his horror, he discovers that the gristle is a nose. Worse, he recognizes the nose as the nose of Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov.

* This text below is performed by William Kentridge as a theatrical monologue, or "lecture/performance." It was first presented at the Sydney Biennale of 2008 and has subsequently been seen in Cape Town, Seattle, San Francisco, New York, Naples, Aix-en-Provence, Kyoto, Hiroshima, Seoul, and Mulheim.

Ivan Yakovlevich lapsed into silence. The thought that the police might search the place, find the nose and afterwards bring a charge against him, very nearly sent him out of his mind. Already he could see that scarlet collar beautifully embroidered with silver, that sword . . . and he began shaking all over.

The barber takes the nose, and goes round the city, looking for a place to discreetly throw the nose away. He walks to a bridge over the river Neva, and there he drops the nose over the parapet. And he is just turning around when a policeman appears and stops him. And then, the author says,

Ivan Yakovlevich turned pale But at this point everything became so enveloped in mist it is really impossible to say what happened afterwards.

So then we jump to Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov, who wakes one morning, and finds his nose absent. “To his extreme astonishment, he finds that instead of a nose, there is nothing but an absolutely flat surface.” Later he keeps referring to “that terrible blank space again.” The rest of the story is his attempt to track his nose down, to find it. He goes to a coffee shop, and at the coffee shop he sees someone he thinks he recognizes entering a nearby house.

About two minutes later, the nose really did come out. It was wearing a gold-braided uniform, with a high-standing collar, and chamois trousers, and had a sword at its side. From the plumes on its hat one could tell that it held the exalted rank of State Councilor.

So the question next: how is he going to address this man? Kovalyov follows the nose as it walks down the street. And he follows it into Kazan Cathedral, off Nevsky Prospect.

“What’s the best way of approaching it?” thought Kovalyov. “Judging by its uniform, its hat, and its whole appearance, it must be a State Councilor. But I am damned if I know how to go about it!”

He tried to attract its attention by coughing, but the nose did not interrupt its devotions for one second and continued to perform low bows.

“My dear Sir,” Kovalyov said.

“What do you want?” replied the nose.

“I don’t know how best to put it, Sir, but it strikes me as very peculiar Don’t you know where you belong?”

“Please forgive me,” said the nose. “But would you mind telling me exactly what you are talking about? Explain yourself.”

“How can I make myself clear?” Kovalyov wondered. Nerving himself once more he said: “Of course, I am, as it happens, a collegiate assessor. You will agree that it’s not done for someone in my position to walk around minus a nose.”

“I don’t understand a thing,” the nose replied. “Please make yourself clear.”

“My dear sir,” continued Kovalyov, “I really don’t know what you mean by that. It’s plain enough for anyone to see . . . Unless you want . . . don’t you realize you are my own nose!”

The nose looked at the major and frowned a little.

“My dear fellow, you are mistaken. I am a person in my own right. Furthermore, I don’t see that we can have anything in common. Judging from your uniform buttons, I should say you’re from another government department.”

And here we have the heart of the story. The question of what is of Kovalyov, and what is not? What control does he have over sections of himself—in this case, his nose—and in what way is he a divided person, against himself? On the one hand, trying to convince the nose of who he is, and on the other hand, another part of himself (his nose) absolutely dismissing him.

And there are two themes that emerge from the story. One is the terror of hierarchy. The sense in Russia, of that era—and of the later era—that if you are of a lower rank, you are in complete fear of someone above you. And if you are of a higher rank, there is a murderous contempt of anyone below.

But the other theme of the story is of course this division of the self; what are our limits? How coherent are we in ourselves? This is not such a fanciful division as it sounds. Very often one does find oneself split into two different parts. For example, often when I travel, I’ll find myself in my hotel room at night, and I’ll say, “Alright, it’s midnight, it’s bedtime, there’s the bed, there’s a book next to it, I’m ready for it.” And even as I’m getting ready to go to bed, there’s a second section of myself standing at the door, saying, “It’s only midnight, the night is young, there’re clubs and bars and cafés. There’s life. Come on, let’s go, let’s go!” And the other self is saying, “It’s late, you’ve got to be up early in the morning. There’s a lecture tomorrow. Come, to bed, to bed.” And the other part is saying, “How feeble! How embarrassing even to be seen with you! No, I’m off.” But of course, when we return at 3 AM in the morning, who is waiting for me but my 54 years, saying, “It’s late. Come on. To bed. Time to sleep.”

WK walks to back of stage. Checks stage right and stage left. WK walks back to front of stage.

But to return to the story of the nose. Kovalyov has seen the nose in the cathedral. He has been unable to persuade the nose to return to its rightful place. He rushes to the Chief of Police to try and explain the circumstances, but of course the Chief of Police is absent.

Projection of lecturer (WK¹) enters stage left. WK pauses, then hesitantly waits for WK¹ to leave.

He goes to a newspaper office, to place a classified advertisement, looking for his nose, but the newspaper clerk refuses to take the advertisement.

“I can’t print an advertisement like that in our paper,” the clerk said after a long silence.

“What? Why not?”

“I’ll tell you. A paper can get a bad name. If everyone started announcing his nose had run away, I don’t know how it would all end. And enough false reports and rumors get past . . . no, no. It’s not possible.”

WK checks that WK¹ has left. Looks into the wings stage right and stage left.

Defeated, Kovalyov leaves to contemplate “that ridiculous blank space again.” But then, *mirabile dictu*, the nose is arrested, and a policeman brings it back to Kovalyov. The policeman says,

WK¹ enters stage left. Steps into centre of projection. Slowly sidles off stage left.

“Very strange. We intercepted it just as it was boarding the stagecoach bound for Riga. Its passport was made out in the name of some civil servant. Strangely enough, I mistook it for a gentleman at first. Fortunately I had my spectacles with me so I could see it was really a nose.”



Kovalyov attempts to reattach his nose, with spit, with office glue. But to no avail. A doctor is summoned, whose struggle to put the nose back on Kovalyov’s face also fails. He tries to convince Kovalyov that if he just puts the nose in a jar of sour vodka, then he could take the jar around to different fairs, and make a lot of money from dis-

playing his nose. In fact the doctor would be happy to buy it from Kovalyov. It gets worse. Rumors spread. It is reported that the nose of the major has been seen in different parts of the city, and that it appears every afternoon at the city park.

Every day crowds of inquisitive people flocked there. Someone said they had seen the nose in Junker's Store, and this produced such a crush that the police had to be called.

But then Kovalyov wakes one morning, and the nose is back on his face. The story ends here, but the author himself is not quite finished with us:

Only now, after much reflection, can we see that there is a great deal that is very far-fetched in this story. Apart from the fact that it's highly unlikely for a nose to disappear in such a fantastic way and then reappear in various parts of the town dressed as a State Councilor, it is hard to believe that Kovalyov was so ignorant as to think newspapers would accept advertisements about noses.

No, I don't understand it, not one bit!

But the strangest, most incredible thing of all is that authors should write about such things. That, I confess, is beyond my comprehension. It's just . . . no, no, I don't understand it at all! Firstly, it's no use to the country whatsoever; secondly—but even then it's no use either . . . I simply don't know what one can make of it.

. . . And yet, if you stop to think for a moment, there's a grain of truth in it. Whatever you may say, these things do happen in this world—rarely, I admit, but they do happen.

WK turns to face screen. Drinks water. Looks into the wings stage right, stage left. Returns to center stage.

Stern: Tristram Shandy

WK: Gogol's story of a man divided from his nose goes both forwards and backwards. It goes forward to Shostakovich who wrote his opera based on the story in 1928, ninety years after Gogol. In Shostakovich, the real and absurd division of the self resonated with the fragmentation of Dada, and with the rupture of the 1917 revolution. The serious lightness of Gogol gets caught up in the storm of twentieth-century modernism. "MUDDLE, NOT MUSIC" was the judgment of *Pravda* on Shostakovich's music. Performances of the

opera were stopped. Shostakovich was lucky to escape with his life—never mind his nose.

Enter WK¹ stage left pushing a chair. WK stops, aware of a pressure behind him. WK¹ moves the chair, sits. WK does not turn round. WK continues, haltingly waiting for WK¹ to settle.

But the story goes backwards too. In 1781 Laurence Stern publishes his novel *Tristram Shandy*, and in this novel is set another book—a book within a book. And in this book within the book, is another story of a man who loses his nose. A man with a remarkable nose travels from Frankfurt to Strasbourg, and there in Strasbourg he loses his nose. This is fifty years before Gogol: 230 years ago, the absurd is alive and well.

This is the story

Fifty years before Gogol wrote

This is the story of a man who loses his nose. A man with a remarkable nose travels to Strasbourg, and there he loses his nose. The traveler's nose appears on the head of an abbess, the abbess of Quedlinburg nunnery.

The courteous stranger's nose had got perched on top of the pineal gland of her brain, and made such rousing work in the fancies of the four great dignitaries of her chapter, they could not get a wink of sleep the whole night thro' for it—there was no keeping a limb still amongst them—in short, they got up like so many ghosts.

WK¹ on the chair moves off stage. WK turns, sees his absence. Follows his chair to the edge of the stage, shouts into the wings after him.

The penitentiaries of the third order of Saint Francis, and all the severer orders of nuns who lay that night in blankets or hair-cloth, were still in a worse condition than the abbess of Quedlinburg—by tumbling and tossing, and tossing and tumbling from one side of their beds to the other the whole night long—the several sisterhoods had scratch'd and maul'd themselves all to death—they got out of their beds almost flayed alive—everybody thought Saint Anthony had visited them for probation with his fire—they had never once, in short, shut their eyes the whole night long from vespers to matins.

So the story goes back from Shostakovich to Gogol and from Gogol to Stern. But it is not that simple. For Stern is not the author. As with Gogol he splits himself between himself as the author of the story and as a reader of it, denying authorship. He is not himself, or at any rate is other or more than himself.



WK¹ enters pushing a ladder on wheels, identical to the ladder on stage. WK turns, sees ladder. WK¹ writes notes in a black notebook. The book is identical to the black notebook held by WK.

And Stern invents another author called Hafen Slawkenbergius, who is the author of a chapter inside *Tristram Shandy*, in which the story is told of the man who loses his nose. Slawkenbergius is described as the greatest expert on noses in the world, and he has written a ten-volume treatise on noses—which Stern assures us is one of the great repositories of knowledge, not only of noses, but of all human understanding. And there is one chapter in which he recounts the story which I told you, of the man who travels from Strasbourg to Frankfurt (chapter ten of volume nine of this treatise within the novel).

WK² enters stage left, moves to ladder, sits on a step of the ladder. WK² writes notes in a black notebook. WK climbs the ladder and addresses WK¹, WK², and the audience.

But in order to prove that it is an authentic document and not just Stern's invention, Stern quotes the book at length, in the Latin in which Slawkenbergius wrote it.

Dolus inest, anime mi, ait hospes—nusus est falsus.

'Tis an imposture, my dear, said the master of the inn—'tis a false nose.

Verus est, respondit uxor.
'Tis a true nose, said his wife.

Ex abiete factus est, ait ille, terebinthinum olet.
'Tis made of fir-tree, said he, I smell the turpentine.

Carbunculus inest, ait uxor.
There's a pimple on it, said she.

Mortuus est nasus, respondit hospes.
'Tis a dead nose, replied the innkeeper.

Vivus est, ait illa, et si ipsa vivam tangam.
'Tis a live nose, and if I am alive myself, said the innkeeper's wife, I will touch it.

Cervantes: Don Quixote

WK descends ladder. WK¹ and WK² follow the talk in their black notebooks.

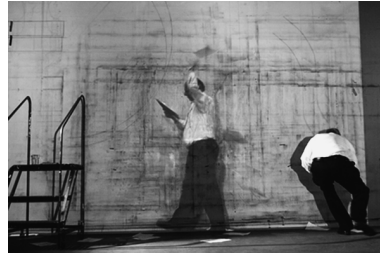
WK: But the story also goes back further. We have gone from Shostakovich to Gogol, from Gogol to Stern, and from Stern to Cervantes, the author of *Don Quixote*. It goes back in the way that Cervantes himself denies the fact that he is the author of the book, of the stories of *Don Quixote*. You have the author of the book. And you have the author of the book denying the authorship of the book, and also denying the stories that are told within it. It is unclear where we are. The world is both inside and outside of the author (and of the characters in his book), and of course of us, the readers.

At the end of one chapter, no more extraordinary than any of the others, Cervantes writes:

I cannot believe, nor can I persuade myself, that everything written in the preceding chapter actually happened in its entirety. All the adventures up to this point have been possible and plausible, but with regard to this one in the cave, I can find no way to consider it true, since it goes so far beyond the limits of reason. But it is not possible for me to think that Don Quixote, the truest—that Don Quixote, the truest and most noble knight of his day, would lie, for he would not tell a lie even if he were shot with arrows . . . I cannot believe . . .

*WK² pulls ladder off.
WK breaks off talking. Watches ladder and WK² leaving.
WK¹ leaves.*

WK follows WK¹. Drops notes.
 WK¹ reappears. Pauses. Leaves stage.
 WK watches.
 WK¹ reappears. Objects drop around WK¹. WK¹ walks off.
 WK¹ enters, throwing notes away.
 WK picks up notes from the floor.
 WK¹ stands, hands in pockets.
 WK gathers notes. Comes to front of stage.



What is our edge?
 Head banging against our own limitations.
 Feel the cliff where our intelligence ends.
 Bouncing back off the inside walls of our head.
 Studio as head.
 Parcours d'atelier.
 Read the section three times.
 Pickled hands.
 Playing cards against yourself.
 Do not move until three new ideas have come
 Do not move until three new ideas have come
 Do not move until three new ideas have come

. . . These notes make no sense whatsoever. I think what I meant, what we meant, with these notes, I think what I mean, what I am trying to find, is where we meet the outside world. One of the edges is the limit of understanding. The forlorn space where we feel our brain ending—surrounded by the woods and ravines of that which our brain won't compute. Where an idea hits the edge of our skull and will not continue. The books whose words are understandable but whose sentences defeat us. The simultaneous translator we rely on, lodged behind our ear, is on long leave and we are stranded. An idea, a connection, will not arrive. We are locked inside our limitations, waiting for some way through, some way to let a new spark get from outside us in, or inside us out. Trying to find ways of getting from inside our heads, to outside our heads. Trying to get past the limitations of our own brain, or our own space. How is one aware of things that are inside, that move outwards, and things that are outside that move in?

What Is of Us and What Is Outside: Rosinante

WK: So that you have for example in Don Quixote's, in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, we have the horse of Rosinante. And once one has read of that horse, it comes and sits inside one, so that for all the centuries afterward, as horses appear, they all also carry within them the ghost of Rosinante, of the horse of Don Quixote. Say the word here and Rosinante rears up.



Lightning.

This is easy, a lightning between the outside world and the shell of one's head.

No translator needed.

Shift of protocol, whispering in one's ear.

The blank space of ideas

DRINK WATER. That is what it says in the notes—DRINK WATER.

WK crosses to ladder and drinks water.

Returns to center stage.

The End of Understanding

WK: Understanding has come to an end. A sense that things should connect. A nose to a face, a face to a history. But the gaps are too wide. And even as I am doing it, I am aware of another self standing outside the room, watching myself, saying, "OK, you can go on as long as you like, it's still not going to make sense. You can keep everyone here for another two hours, but it's never going to make any sense."

I Am an Artist; Taking a Line for a Walk

WK: But then a relief, to say, "OK, that's not my job. I am an artist. It is not my job to understand this. My job is just to make drawings." And the voice at the back returns, "Why the fuck are you going on and on and on like this, over here?"

But it is as if the hope is that the idea, the words, can be like a line, to make a thought, an image appear. It is as if speaking could be the same as drawing a line, to take you from inside where you are to something that is outside of yourself, and beyond yourself. As if I could talk a line into existence, and as if words themselves could make ideas. Paul Klee speaks about taking a line for walk, the idea that the line could precede, that that's a way that one could find a new idea. And it's always a question of who walks whom. Are we taking the line for a walk? Or is the line taking us for a walk, like a dog on a leash, leading us round a lamppost, a fire hydrant, showing some new and unexpected vista round a corner? Who is leading who? As if something in the physical act of drawing would be enough to lead us to a new idea. What is the part of ourselves that wants to allow some other section, some other part of oneself, to take control of thinking, of making?

Split, Permeable: Persephone in the Labyrinth

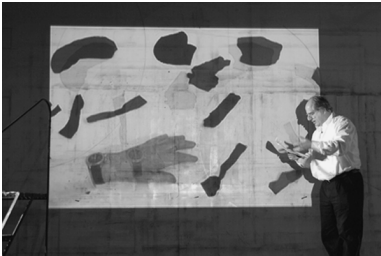
WK: It's a bit like Persephone with the line, with the ball of string inside the labyrinth. As though this line itself is going to lead us out of the labyrinth, out of ourselves, into a different area. Understanding that even as part of us leaves the labyrinth, another part stays behind. Even as part of us approaches the outside world there is part of the outside world that lodges in us and is stuck in us.

Large amorphous object falls from ceiling and rolls off stage.

Now what are the links between what is inside us, and what is outside? How much do we need from the outside world, for us to understand? And how much of the outside world is lodged in us already?

Recognition and the Pressure for Meaning

WK: How much do we need to understand or know of the world, to understand? You have, for example, an assortment of torn paper shapes.



Torn black paper shapes. They arrange themselves in the form of a horse. Fragments leave the screen, reducing the horse until it is made up of four pieces of paper—a neck, a back, two legs. WK looks around. The screen is blank. WK moves to ladder. Hesitates. Moves ladder. Pauses. Moves ladder again. Is lost.

Is this about a generous viewing?
Or an irresistible urge to make sense?

One sees a series of abstract black shapes, and one will force them into a meaning for oneself. So that even as one tries to say, no, it's a series of sheets of black paper, that are being torn and manipulated, one cannot stop oneself seeing a figure, a shape, a horse, a form.

What is this pressure for meaning? It's about the pressure for meaning we have inside us, where you finish everybody else's sentences. You finish them literally, if they stop halfway through. But otherwise even as they are speaking, we are predicting the rest of the sentence. It's as if we have sent someone ahead, to the road ahead, to look around the corner and see what is coming, and come back and report to us what is there. And with this push for meaning we latch onto any half-word or half-image and make sense of it. And once a meaning is found, we hold onto it even as it disintegrates. We do this with images, but also with ideas, and also with ideals, so that even as utopia is dead, we hang onto its skeleton, hoping to resurrect it



through a wish, a will Even when a horse is reduced to being just the stick of the hobbyhorse, we hold onto it, as a horse. We hold onto it as a hand to a saving banister. A single line, and we still see Rosinante.

This pulling together of pieces is half of who we are. The other half is

Filming the 4 AM panic

WK: The 4 AM panic, the dark hour when every project seems both impossible and possible. Lying awake trying to redesign the largest of projects, four times over, between 4:17 and 4:43 in the morning. So I am awake at 4 in the morning, trying to put the pieces together, thinking, should I be filming this panic also, as showing part of the process of how the lecture is made? Do I go out of the bedroom, out across the garden, unlock the studio, disarm the alarm, get a camera, trip over the dogs, cross the lawn, lock the front door, set up the camera and tripod at the foot of the bed, reassure Anne that I'm not making domestic pornography, and film this panic, this inability to make sense of all the fragmentary ideas that are lying around? There must be a limit to the ridiculous things one will do. Try to sleep. The artist is always at work, even when he sleeps. The artist is at work only when he sleeps.

The nose dives into a swimming pool.

*Gogol, Stern, Cervantes,
Shostakovich, NOT Persephone*

WK: And how to put the pieces together, between Gogol, Stern, Cervantes, Shostakovich, it goes backwards and forwards. What is the relationship of the nose to the absurd, to the historical facts?

An enamel bucket filled with water.



Is Trotsky the nose of the communist party of the USSR—of the CCCP—from old stamps, who did not exactly absent himself from the party, but is absented from it? Like the nose, his disguise is penetrated. Unlike the nose, he is not simply arrested, but assassinated in Mexico in 1941.

Nose back out of water and onto the diving board.

Of course, it's not that at all, you fool, it's not Persephone in the labyrinth with a string and a lion, it's Daedalus who designed it, the Minotaur is inside it, Theseus is the person with the string, and the string is given to him by Ariadne. You are not Persephone at all. Fool, what did you go to school for? I'm a poltroon, an idiot, a fool. I hate myself, I hate myself!

WK¹ and Anne in bed, tossing and turning.



*Shostakovich and the Party, The Dentist,
The Clock Has Stopped, Leaves to a Tree*

*Close-up of Shostakovich playing the piano.
Shostakovich as nose (nose superimposed on
Shostakovich).*

WK: And I think, OK, if you think about Shostakovich and the Party, the Party split in half, Shostakovich split in half—needing to believe in the Party, but also needing to understand his distance from the Party . . . Is it about comedy or tragedy, what is laughter in the face of the severest woe, and this wrench between modernism and politics, and the red wedge that will defeat the white square? And this marriage

of bad faith between politics and modernism—OK, I’ve got the dentist, I mustn’t forget the dentist, can’t change the appointment because all the technicians will be on standby like mechanics.

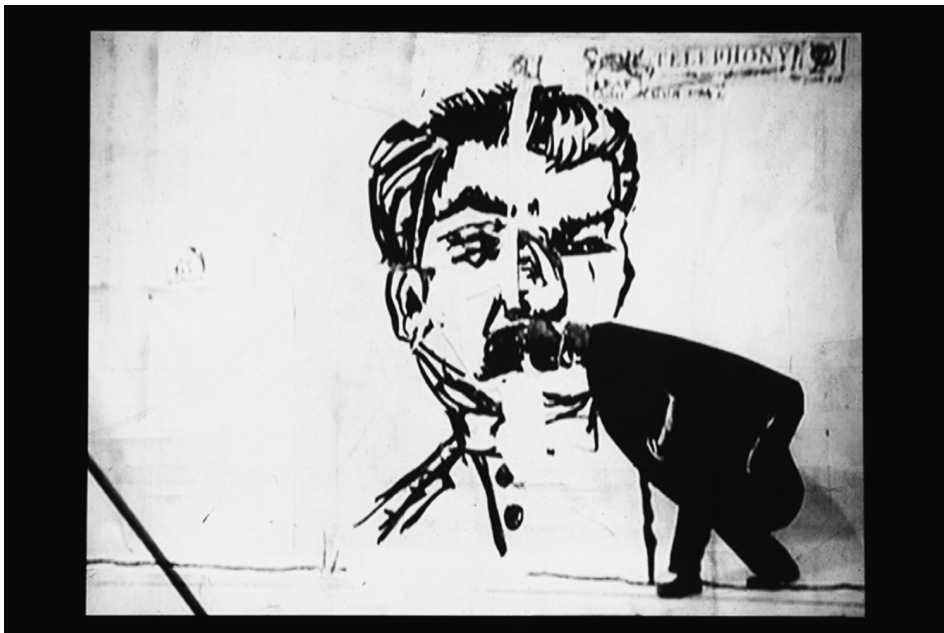
The nose makes a line drawing of Stalin, ducks underneath the drawing.

Lenin, with his dictum of “Find me reliable anti-Futurists.” (Anti-Futurists with good teeth.) What is the nature of hope, in the face of political disappointment? I mean Stalin, by the 1930s Stalin had become so huge, that each time he makes a speech, the people have to applaud so hard and loud, that there are buckets of salt water placed next to them, to rub their hands in, to recover from the applause. Not a nose in sour vodka, but pickled hands.

Anne and WK¹ in bed. Shadow of a man dancing.

And I think that perhaps the clock has stopped, because it’s now only 4: 18, and it seems this panic has been going on for two hours, not 15 minutes. And Anne is saying, “You must go to sleep. If the words come not as easily as leaves to a tree, better they do not come at all. Your job is to make drawings, not to do the words, leave those to other people.”

And I think, if only I had not agreed to this speech, then everything would be fine.



Photos of purged members of the Politburo from the 1930s: noses blanked out.

But then, OK, the opera *The Nose* was written in 1928. In 1930 it gets performed, and it gets stopped. And in the 1930s you have the purges not only of Shostakovich, but of other members of the Communist Party, and it's about the Party eating itself, and the Party disintegrating. And it's not only a self that disintegrates, that splits itself apart, it's also the speech itself, and language, which stops making any sense. Which even as a sentence is formed, takes its hat and stick and goes along its own path.

Montage:

Stalin smoking.

Numbers being chopped in half.

Nose does the pole vault.

WK! and Anne in bed.

Paper cut-out lovers belabor each other.

Nose with umbrella trains a dog.

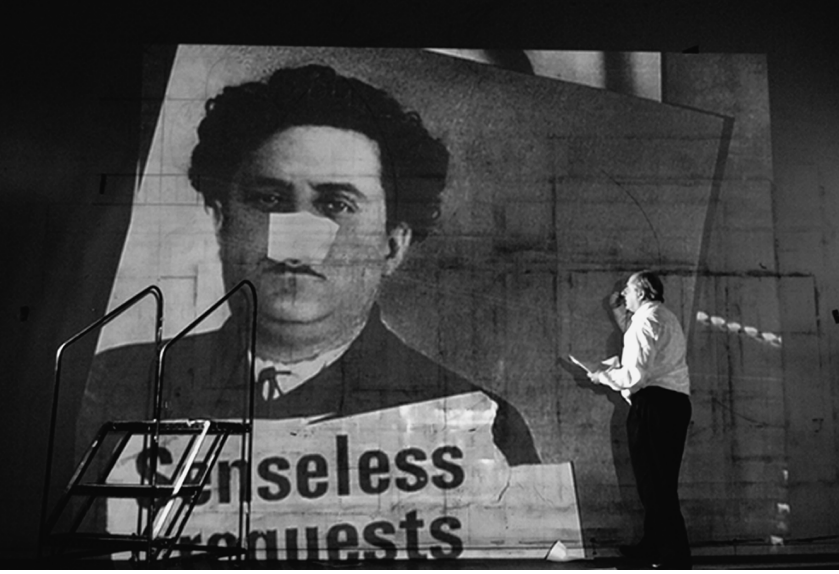
Paper cut-out horse.

Hands dipped into the bucket of water.

Nose climbs to the top of the stairs.

Nose falls down ladder.

1. Cutting off your nose to spite your face.
2. Accepting the judgment of Solomon, cutting the baby with the bath water.
3. Moses supposes his toeses are noses but . . . something something something erroneously.
4. New shelves in the cupboard, make one higher for boots and one narrower for hats.
5. It is all household struggle.
6. Stalin's brothers were all strongmen in leotards with handlebar moustaches, bending iron bars above their heads.
7. Don't rush, keep the words clear.
8. Practice my vowels before I speak. Sorry I can't, can't, can't come to the phone! Please leave a message.
9. It's alright. It will make sense in its own good time, like next year.
10. Don't be pathetic. Work this out, don't be prosthetic. 4:17 and 20 seconds, 4:17 and 22 seconds.
11. How many sheets of blank paper are left in the ream?
12. Molly to the vet tomorrow.
13. Vet. Molly. Cupboard shelves. Solomon. Noses and toeses but Moses supposes erroneously.
14. Coconuts are horses hooves.
15. The artist is at work only when he sleeps.
16. Take the "O" out of noose. Noose snoose snooze snore sneeze.



WK climbs ladder. Throws notes. Shouting. WK¹ enters. Catches the sheets of paper as they are thrown.

Who wrote these notes? None of this makes sense. Trotsky the nose of the Communist Party? Do you think this is a Bar Mitzvah speech? When did Trotsky have his ball of string? Keep these notes. Moses supposes indeed. Moses supposes erroneously—always. Take the red wedge. Keep the red circle. See if you can make sense of this.



WK descends the ladder.

It's alright. We are calm. To get our bearings. We have gone from Cervantes to Stern, from Stern to Gogol, from Gogol to Shostakovich. And now we are in the

1930s. The Communist Party is divided against itself, tearing itself apart. And we have the figure of Bukharin, loyal lieutenant of Lenin, Central Committee member. By the 1930s he is fighting for his life.

WK climbs ladder. Reads from black notebook.

This is the transcript of the plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, February 1937.



WK¹ pushes an upholstered chair into the center of the screen. WK¹ sits on the chair.

Bukharin: Whatever they are testifying against me is not true. (Laughter, noise in the room.) Why are you laughing? There is nothing funny in all this.

But I cannot admit, either today or tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, anything which I am not guilty of. (Noise in the room.) I feel compelled to recall a certain ditty, which was published in its time in the now defunct *Russian Gazette*. "They may beat me, they may beat me senseless,

they may beat me to a pulp. But nobody's gonna kill this kid, not with a stick, a bat, or a stone." (Laughter breaks out throughout the room.) I cannot say, however, that "nobody is gonna kill me."

Kaganovich: Who, may I ask, is the kid here, and who the person wielding a stone?

Bukharin: Obviously it was I who was struck and beaten with a stone. And now not a single member of the plenum, I dare say, thinks that I am concealing some sort of “stone” of resentment, not even the stone-faced Kamenev.

Shkiriatov: But they are all testifying against themselves.

WK² enters carrying a large armchair on his head. WK² sits in the armchair.

Bukharin: If I know who believed what in connection with this, why they were testifying against themselves, I would have told you. But I don't know . . .

Molotov: And is their testimony plausible?

Bukharin: Yes, it's plausible.

A voice: You're lying!

Bukharin: You can say “You're lying!” all you want.

Mikoyan: And when Rykov, speaking about your note, says that where there is smoke, there is fire—is he telling the truth?

Bukharin: Generally speaking, it seems there can be no smoke without fire. (Laughter.)



Mikoyan: Well, that's precisely what we are talking about.

WK¹ claps hands.

Bukharin: But that brings up another question. To what extent can you call my note "smoke"? Allow me to conduct a "vicious struggle" not only against myself but also against all of my former allies. If you say that I wanted to discredit the NKVD, then I must declare that I had absolutely no intention of doing so.

WK¹ leaves stage right.

Lozovsky: You wrote that it is demand that produces supply.

WK² sees WK¹ has left. He reaches across and moves WK¹'s chair in front of his chair and puts his feet up.

Bukharin: Demand produces supply—that means that those who give testimony know the nature of the general atmosphere. (Laughter, noise in the room.)

Postyshev: What kind of atmosphere are you talking about?

WK¹ enters. Sees his chair is missing. Squats against the wall.

Bukharin: The whole tragedy of my situation lies in this, that this Piatakov and other like him so poisoned the atmosphere, such an atmosphere arose that no one believes human feelings—not emotions, not the impulses of the heart, not tears. (Laughter.) Many manifestations of human feeling, which had earlier represented a form of proof—and there was nothing shameful in this—have today lost their validity and force.

Kaganovich: You practiced too much duplicity!

WK² slides chair off stage.

Bukharin: Comrades, let me say the following concerning what happened—

Khlopiankin: It's time to throw you in prison!

Bukharin: What?

Khlopiankin: You should have been thrown in prison a long time ago!

Bukharin: My sins before the party have been very grave. I've confessed these sins. I confessed that from 1930 to 1932 I committed many political sins. But with the same forcefulness with which I confess my real guilt, with that same forcefulness I deny the guilt which is thrust upon

me, and I shall deny it forever. And not because it has only personal significance, but because I believe no one should under any circumstances take upon himself anything superfluous, especially when the party doesn't need it, when the country doesn't need it, when I don't need it. (Noise in the room, laughter.)

WK¹ picks up armchair, carries it off on his head.

. . . I should say, first of all, that I know the Central Committee well enough to say that the CC can never be intimidated.

Khlopiankin: Why did you write that you won't end your hunger strike until charges against you have been dropped?



WK¹ enters sliding chaise longue on wheels. He sits on the chaise longue. He takes off his shoes and lies down.

Bukharin: Comrades, I implore you not to interrupt me, because it is difficult for me, it is simply physically hard for me to speak. I will answer any question posed to me, but please do not interrupt me just now. I won't shoot myself, because then people will say I killed myself as to harm the party. But if I die, as it were, from an illness, then what will you lose by it? (Laughter.)

Voroshilov: Did you hear that: "I won't shoot myself, but I will die"?!

Bukharin: It's easy for you to talk about me. What will you lose, after all? Look, if I am a saboteur, a son of a bitch, then why spare me? I make no claims to anything. I am just describing what's on my mind, what I am going through. If this in any way entails any political damage, however minute, then, no question about it, I'll do whatever you say. (Laughter.) Why are you laughing? There is absolutely nothing funny about any of this . . . Please permit me to finish and explain this whole business to the best of my ability.

Kaganovich: You are not very good at explaining it—that's the whole point.



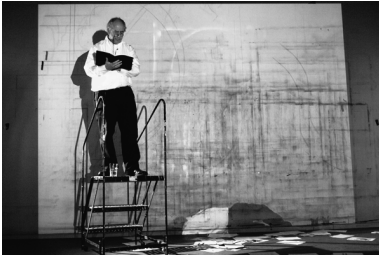
The chaise longue slowly splits in two. WK¹ is balanced across the two halves.

Bukharin: Whether I explain it well or poorly, I am speaking sincerely, my thoughts are sincere.

Kaganovich: Not every act of sincerity is correct.

Bukharin: In any case, I am speaking sincerely.

Molotov: And we too are criticizing you sincerely. (Laughter. Up roar in the room.)



Bukharin: . . . Comrades, I implore you not to interrupt me, because it is difficult for me, it is simply physically hard for me to speak.

Voices: Blackmailer!

Voroshilov: You scoundrel! Keep you trap shut! How vile! How dare you speak like that!

Bukharin: But you must understand—it's very hard for me to die.

The chaise longue separates. WK¹ falls to the floor.

Stalin: And it's easy for us to go on living?! (Noise in the room, prolonged laughter.)

WK¹ stands up. Freezes.

WK freezes.

Stage lights off.

Music—Philip Miller.

Projection of a procession of shadows and paper cut-outs.

Music ends.

Roll credits: Stage Direction, Sue Pam-Grant; Editing, Catherine Meyburgh; Music, Philip Miller; Galop Band: Dan Selsick, trombone; Billy Middleton, tuba; Adam Howard, trumpet; Ntokozo Zunga, Castrol tin-can guitar; Bethuel Mbonani, percussion; Thulani Manaka, vocal leader; © WILLIAM KENTRIDGE 2008

END

