

# Shining light on the refugee shadowland

**Pinteresque melds unsettling fiction with the harsh reality of people who came to Canada to escape war and oppression**

By SUSAN DEEFHOLTS  
FOR THE RECORD

In Harold Pinter's 2005 Nobel lecture, he discusses the importance of ambiguity in art: "A thing is not necessarily true or false. It can be true and false."

While this uncertainty might be essential to Harold Pinter the writer, Harold Pinter the citizen feels it is essential to ask what is true and what is false in the world — and to do everything possible to penetrate the ambiguities of politics.

MT Space's *Pinteresque*, which opened Thursday night at the Registry Theatre, dwells in this unsettling shadowland.

It straddles the boundary between art and reality, interspersing fictional sequences with clips of interviews with people who came to Canada as refugees of war and oppression.

The subject is one that carries personal resonance. My grandparents and relatives have gruesome, poignant stories of the horrors of the Partition of India, when Pakistan became a separate country, and my husband's parents defected from Communist Hungary, leaving everything behind. They were unable, even, to wish their loved ones goodbye.

The story in *Pinteresque* is the story of the Partition, and of those who defected from Hungary — the story of refugees from Lebanon, Nigeria, Rwanda, Afghanistan.

It is the story of what it means to flee your home with whatever few possessions you can carry, holding fast to your family, even as you face the perpetual threat of being separated from them by mischance or brutality.

It is also a story of hidden, dark places, where human rights are irrelevant — where the currency is flesh and the caprices of guards reign supreme. The flash on a digital camera illuminated one of those places in 2004, revealing the careless atrocities of torture for the world to see — but *Pinteresque* reminds us that there are many other, dark corners of the world that we may never learn about.

The fictional narrative is an encompassing one — the tale of a family, desperate to escape from imminent danger. We never learn any details of the situation they are fleeing — nor is a specific country ever named.

Sometimes, the action is expressionistic — an outward projection of inner distress, confusion and horror.

The ambiguities of this narrative are potent, filled with resonance and powerfully enacted by the four talented players, Badih Abou Chakra, Nicholas Cumming, Anastaziya Tataryn and Stella Umeh.

By contrast, the accounts of the refugees are all about specifics. We hear David Umeh, Stella's father, tell of his departure from Nigeria, and Mike Toth talk of his defection from Hungary.

Juan-Carlos Gomez injects humour into his account of his arrival in Canada for the first time, while Peter Nahra and Huda Badawi's stories of being strip-searched can only touch on the humiliation of the experience, for those of us who have never had to endure it.

This, then, is the truth of it — the reality of each person's experiences.

Nick Storing's potent soundtrack adds a visceral urgency to the narratives, while Terrance Odette's video sequences provides another facet to the piece by using the ironic juxtaposition of images.

The final component of the work consists of choreographed pieces that speak to the cultural issues surrounding politics, media and war.

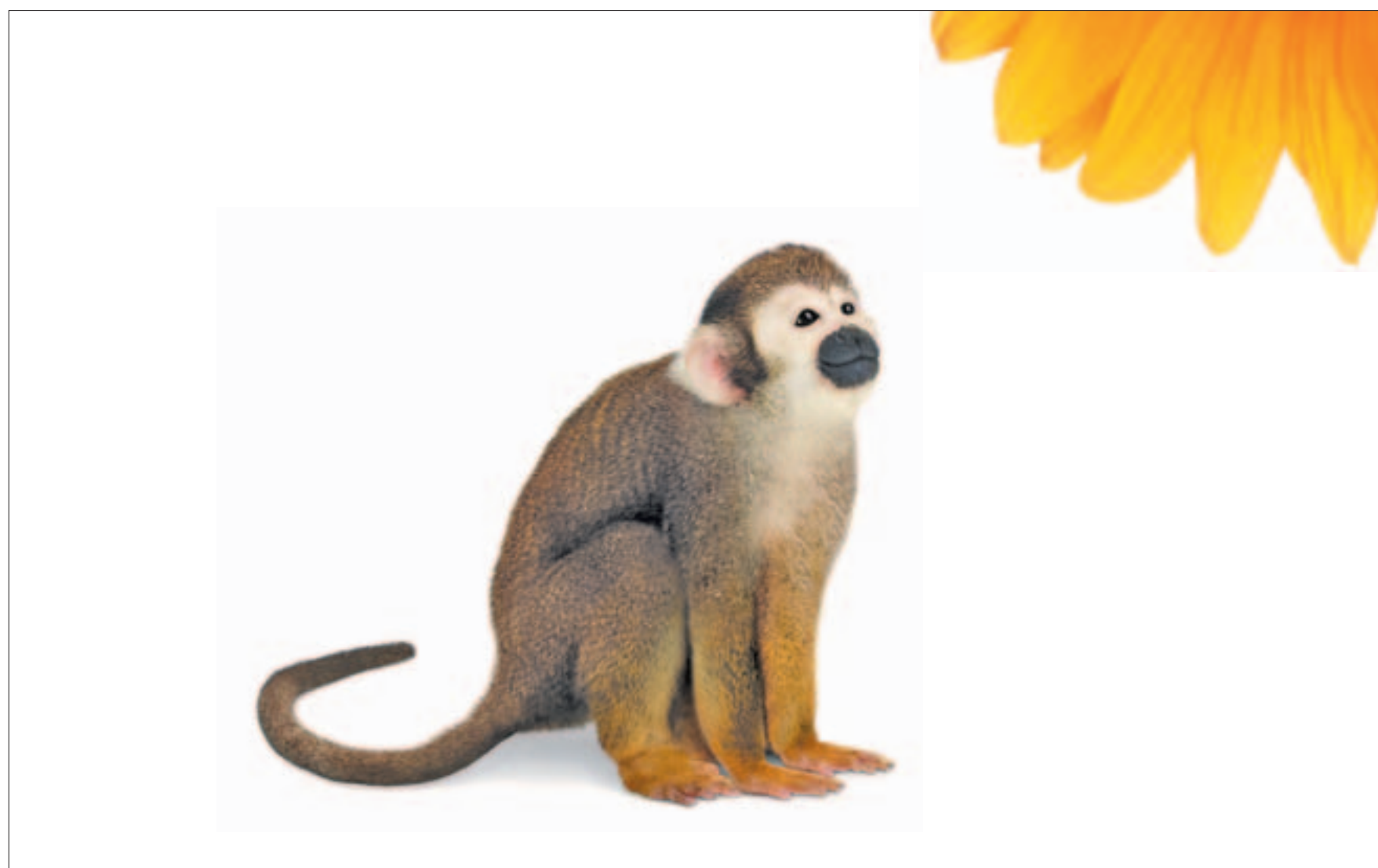
*Pinteresque* is a collaborative creation in the best sense of the word. Director Majdi Bou-Matar does an excellent job of bringing this collective vision of diverse ideas and motifs into powerful focus. For the most part, the scenes are tightly paced and thoughtfully ordered.

As with Pinter's speech, *Pinteresque* carries anger and criticism as its banner, seeking to uncover truth in its portrayal of politics and war.

It uses the pointed clarity of satire, the ambiguities of art and the honesty of personal experience to enact many of the ideas and themes touched on in Pinter's lecture, all the while conveying a unique message of its own that speaks to the experience of the refugee immigrant.



**Pinteresque** is a multi-disciplinary work spanning dance, physical theatre, music, sound and video. Motivated by Harold Pinter's 2005 Nobel Prize lecture, *Art, Truth and Politics*, this creation follows the journeys of refugees living in Canada as it explores issues of war, death, injustice, mass media and power.



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