



THE BELARUS FREE THEATRE:

OPENING A WINDOW INTO TRUTH THROUGH AN ART OF

RESISTANCE

Alexander Grigoreyovich Lukashenko has held the presidency of Belarus almost since the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. This puts his reign at the top of the ladder among European presidencies. But given the poor economy in Belarus, its lack of adequate social and health services, its strictly enforced restrictions on freedom of expression, its chronic electoral fraud and blatant cronyism, and the country's reputation as the last truly Stalinist regime left on the European continent, his longevity is seen more as a symbol of stagnation and ham-fisted control rather than an indicator of productive calm and continuity. The Belarus Free Theatre

(BFT) was founded in 2005 by Natalia Koliada and Nikolai Khaleyn to fulfill what they see as an artist's duty "to tell human truths and illuminate the lies behind state propaganda and social taboos."

BFT's first production – a 2005 underground rendition of UK playwright Sarah Kane's *Psychosis 4.48* – was personally denounced by Lukashenko because the piece explored themes of depression, isolation, psychosis and suicide. Lukashenko claimed beyond belief that such situations and states of mind did not even exist in Belarus, and BFT's production maligned the state and subverted the morale of good citizens. In 2007 BFT performed a play called *Being Harold Pinter* in the UK and their work was recognized by Tom Stoppard, Edward Bond and others as artistically remarkable and politically incisive. That same year, another of their underground productions back home (Edward Bond's "Eleven Vests") in Belarus was raided by security squads and police. The actors and the show's producer, Natalia Koliada, was well as many audience members were arrested and served jail time. Then came a massive protest in Minsk against the 2010 presidential election results, and many members of the company were rounded up in scattergun police sweeps. That year probably marked the actual beginning of the Belarus Free Theatre in exile.



Since the company's diaspora into various European capitals, the group's artistic star has shined even brighter. Their productions continue on a regular basis, mirroring the influence of Eastern European experimental practitioners from the latter half of the twentieth century. Poland, in particular, produced the montage-based work of Jerzy Grotowski that used text as a prop, language as a series of gestures or signals, and made the body a medium for a language deeper

that words, ruled by the poetic rules of association, combining images-actions-and embodied metaphors that resonated with multiple meanings and historical / cultural connotations.

And perhaps, some restrained riffs on the neo-expressionist style of Yuri Lyubimov, the “Tanganka way.” Maybe that’s also a gene of two in the DNA of current theatre in the Belarus Free Theatre.

Grotowski’s Theater Laboratory and the Cricot2Theater of Tadeusz Kantor injected highly-charged / multi-valent imagery and intense physicality into the region’s theatre, almost like an inoculation against doing anything mundane, safe or conventional. But these predecessors were more philosophically inclined, seldom if ever political; and the Belarus Free Theatre mos’ def’ upped the ante on confronting illegitimate authority. While it cost them dearly, living in exile / cut off from the culture that nourishes their imaginations and collective vision, they felt the need to rise to the political challenges of their world with a what they call a 3-pronged approach to artistic practice.



Based in the Baltic republics, Warsaw-Poland, London-UK, New York and other locales, BFT actively pursues the *Creation* of new artistic productions in their signature style, a robust Teaching outreach program that works with teens and adults, providing instruction / direction in making devised theatre and practicing a hybrid form of political art they call *artivism*. While with their *Activism* wing they bring to bear more overtly political strategies: one project echoes the thrust of groups like Amnesty International. BFT’s “Letters from Lukashenko Prisoners” seeks to amplify the voices of dissidents jailed by the regime in their homeland. You can read

some of these letters on their website at www.belarusfreetheatre.com. In 2018 the Belarus Free Theatre received the *Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent* from the Human Rights Foundation (NYC / USA).

Their current season featured the “gothic noir” King Stakh’s *Wild Hunt*, riffing on Uladzmir Karathierich’s popular folkloric novel (the piece closed on September 16th). A dystopian psychological drama set in an authoritarian state called *Dogs of Europe* is next on their play list. By all means visit their website and be-thou-powerfully (maybe permanently)-stunned by the visuals extracted from these performances. The shows are currently produced through their home-away-from-home in the London-UK.

The actual *Dogs of War* (immemorial) are ravening right now in Belarus, Ukraine, the Donbas and beyond. Nearly two years ago, Belarus became a staging ground for the invading Russian forces that were turned back from Kyiv. Their land currently “hosts” mobile launching platforms for Russian tactical nuclear missiles. And the missiles, as well. And the resettlement of Russian mercenaries from Prigozhin’s Wagner Group in Belarus – well, who knows how many are still there, where they’re going in the future, or when? Or if they were ever really leaving in the first place?



If all that posturing – and even Prigozhin’s “lamentable accident” - were nothing but a ruse? The Belarus Free Theatre – together with many Ukrainian artists-in-exile – carry on, resisting attempts by the Russian government to absorb and colonize their countries, and encourage the

world to support Ukrainians in defense of their homeland. They continue to resist in the only way they can: making loud, deep, courageous, vulnerable art for the cause of freedom.

In closing, consider this: the title *Dogs of Europe* came from this segment extracted from the poem, *In Memory of WB Yeats*, written by WH Auden in 1939.

“In the nightmare of the dark,

All the dogs of Europe bark

And the living nations wait

Each sequestered in its hate.”

A deep unrest / an eerie anxiety settles over me reading your words, Auden. As if you had just written them. As if you could be writing them, tomorrow, and tomorrow, and ...

Auden, I must ask you - wherever you may be – what are you thinking, how do you feel, watching the resurgence of those same old dogs?

Those dogs are barking here in America, too.



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Please visit the Belarus Free Theatre website; the gallery of production shots and video is – dare I say – astounding! You may also be inspired to help!