

# Theatre of Truth

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Hey!

If anything happens,

I left the children with grandmother

Since this article was written, Russian president Vladimir Putin has launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the Belarusian regime of president Lukashenko has been instrumental in this unprovoked and unlawful attack. While it is heart-breaking to watch the needless loss of life and the outbreak of a war in the heart of Europe, the author of this text stands in solidarity with the heroic and brave Ukrainian people, who are relentlessly fighting for democracy and freedom. Meanwhile, this article wants to shed light on the authoritarian rule of Lukashenko in his own country and the struggle of the defiant independent theatre professionals in Belarus. For this reason, the author also has to remain anonymous for their own safety and that of their family.

a pretyped message on my phone reads, just in case I need to text my partner on the way to the theatre. For a theatre critic, life in Belarus should seem exciting: one only has to read about the innovative and subversive theatre performances under previous totalitarian conditions, under censorship, under repression. Now, however, it is happening right before our eyes - just take your time to be impressed and react, take notes. There is only one problem: It is very scary.

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Fear is the main emotion that Belarusians have been experiencing since August 2020. Some are afraid of reprisals, others are afraid of losing power. President Lukashenko has ruled Belarus for 26 years. The unspoken public compromise was: authority gives stability, people are not to be involved in politics. This compromise was shattered when banker Viktor Babariko began to collect signatures for his presidential nomination. Belarus had never seen such a mass election campaign.

Babariko was also very involved in theatre. His bank was donating regularly to the arts. It began with the TEART festival, which was financially supported by his bank and brought the best European theatre to Minsk to charge a new generation of Belarusian artists with creative energy. He also founded the Ok16 venue for artistic residencies and independent productions.

Generally, though, the Belarusian theatre, with the exception of the Belarusian Free Theatre, had mostly been apolitical. However, when Babariko was jailed by the KGB in June 2020 on vague charges of economic crimes, public theatre figures began to speak out. On social media, many actors decorated their avatars with a heart, the logo of Babariko's election campaign. An open letter was signed by, among many others, the playwright Alexei Dudarev, renowned since Soviet times, and the artistic director of the Yanka Kupala Theatre, Nikolai Pinigin. Independent theatre workers started a movement called Kultprotest.

Immediately after the elections, when a wave of police violence hit the public sphere, the staff of the Yanka Kupala National Academic Theatre made an open statement - a public appeal against violence. In the eyes of the authorities, this was a real audacity. For the past 100 years, during Stalinist repressions, wars, and reforms, the theatre had always remained loyal. Consequently, the authorities took decisive action against the theatre: director Pavel Latushko was fired and all employees who supported him. As a result, only ten actors remained on the staff list of the theatre, leaving it paralyzed – until March 2021, when it reopened with the help of newly recruited artists (mostly students from the Minsk University of Culture).

I remember the day artists were not allowed into the theatre. Many theatre workers from all over the city gathered in front of the service entrance. The atmosphere was filled with anxiety. I remember this painful feeling of when you don't know what to do. At the same time, there was a sense of solidarity and friendliness.

Now, free actors of Kupala theatre perform shows on YouTube. A lot of Belarusian viewers from all over the world join each online premiere. The pandemic has made the production of online performances a common thing – in the face of repression, however, this turned out to be the only way for fired actors to be able to have an audience. The program of the new theatre is modern in a special sense. The violence and fear that rules Belarusian society is revealed through other narrative motifs – family relations in the play *Paulinka* or by way of the example of Nazi Germany in the play *Fear*. Another example, the performance *I*, directed by Roman Podolyako, is based on artists' stories about being a child. Its premiere took place prior to the events of August 2020. Now, every cry of a kindergarten educator, every stern word of a parent gives us an accurate picture of the hidden violence in Belarusian society, which suddenly spilled onto the city streets.

The entire Belarusian theatre scene has become an arena of political struggle: In Minsk, an actress told us how she went to rallies with her mother. Another famous artist, who hosted children's programs on television, stood up for a woman in the crowd and went to prison in her place. A theatre artist in Grodno swam across the river to escape the police. A playwright friend told me how an official from the Ministry of Culture lied to his face that his plays were totally allowed (they were not). In Vitebsk, a performance of *Till Eulenspiegel* was banned while the slogan „Let Flanders live!“ sounded from the stage. Another actress gathered friends in a Café to watch the premiere online when a whole detachment of special forces used brutal force to arrest them.

When the street protests ended, the regime did not stop its acts of repression. News of censorship, denunciations and dismissals for photos from protests began to reach us from state theatres. Dozens of artists were fired, they ended up on the „black lists“, being banned from performing again. For many, the only way out was to emigrate, to make honest art abroad. Meanwhile, the „unreliable“ actors who managed to stay on have since used their performances to appeal to the audience. Sometimes, theatre itself becomes a collaborative act of defiance. At such performances, the actors applaud the audience afterwards.

Actors have also invited me to underground performances of banned plays or to master classes organized from abroad. You prepare in advance for such events: warn your relatives, prepare documents, wear something more suitable for prison than a theatre visit. When you approach the place of the performance, you try to notice anything

suspicious. At these performances, the audience is grateful for the opportunity to feel free, to feel the solidarity.

Still, the official theatrical life in Minsk also continues. Theatres have formally pledged allegiance to traditional forms and ideals. In fact, most of their repertoire includes toothless productions of the classics and vulgar comedies. The theatres loyal to Lukashenko have not yet found a convincing aesthetic platform. Because Lukashenko himself has no ideology except to stay in power by any means necessary.

The building of the official Kupala Theatre also stayed empty for a long time. In order to reopen, they had to arrange for auditions, which not a single decent artist attended. Finally, the troupe, consisting of several old and newly recruited artists and students, announced their first performance. It was a Belarusian classic, Yanka Kupala's play *Paulinka*. I

went to see it. It left me with a strong impression, and not because of any bad acting. But because the audience was not theatrical. At a good performance, the audience becomes united, but here there was a feeling that the artists were playing in front of an empty hall.

In one of the scenes of Kupala's play, a young girl tells her father that she is not going to marry the man he chose for her. Instead, she chooses to marry the guy who is on strike. In return, the father wants to beat her. A poorly played episode that should normally trigger disgust. After all, the play was written a hundred years ago – but look at us now, nothing much has changed. An entire theatre community has become the young defiant child of the state. It's sad. But as underground and free theatre continues to expose the lies that surround us, hope remains.

Written by a Belarusian theatre critic

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