



Bridge Conversations

ARTS & DEMOCRACY

Bridge Conversations

People Who Live and Work in Multiple Worlds

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People Who Live and Work in Multiple Worlds
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ARTS & DEMOCRACY PROJECT builds the momentum of a growing movement that links arts and culture, participatory democracy, and social justice. Our work is based on the creative power of arts and culture as a catalyst for action—especially among people who have been traditionally disenfranchised. Our programs link the national and the local, reflecting the belief that social change, policymaking, and field building are best grounded in the nuanced and dynamic contexts of community practice. We support cultural organizing and cross-sector collaborations; raise the visibility of transformative work; cross-pollinate cultural practitioners with activists, organizers, and policymakers; and create spaces for reflection such as these Bridge Conversations.

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THEATER AND BANNED CULTURAL EXPRESSION IN BELARUS

freeDimensional talks with the Belarus Free Theatre

By Todd Lester and Carolin Wiedemann

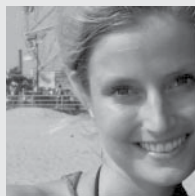
NATALIA KOLIADA AND NIKOLAI KHALEZIN are founding artistic directors of the Belarus Free Theatre. They are collaborators, with Vladimir Scherban on *Eurepica. Challenge*, a new European epic. Khalezin is the author of *Generation Jeans* and *Discover Love*, among ten plays and 200 publications. Koliada started a campaign in support of the UN Convention against Enforced Disappearances through *Discover Love*, co-authored with Khalezin. They have helped initiate the global artistic campaign Free Belarus, and in 2011 received an OBIE, French Republic Human Rights Prize, Europe Theatre Prize Special Mention, Freedom to Create Prize, and Atlantic Council Award.



TODD LESTER is the founder of freeDimensional and, more recently, the Creative Resistance Fund. Before launching freeDimensional, he served as information and advocacy manager for the International Rescue Committee in Sudan.



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BELARUS FREE THEATRE is an underground company that began in 2005, during the second term (2001–2006) of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, as an artistic means of resisting government pressure and censorship. It was founded by playwrights and human rights activists Nikolai Khalezin and his wife, theatre producer Natalia Koliada. As a dramatist, Nikolai became famous with his piece *Ja prishel (Here I am)*, which attracted numerous international awards. The team was joined by stage director Vladimir Scherban, who has produced the majority of Free Theatre performances. Currently the theatre consists of ten actors, a dramatist, four managers, and two technical assistants.

Under the current political system, Belarus Free Theatre has no official registration, no premises, nor any other facilities. While it has gained critical acclaim internationally, it is effectively banned at home. Rehearsals and performances (free of charge for the public) are normally held secretly in small private apartments, which, due to security and the risk of persecution, constantly must be changed. On several occasions, performances were given in street cafes and in the countryside in the woods, with audiences alerted via text message or e-mail. Members of the Theatre have been repeatedly harassed by the authorities for their participation in the Belarus Free Theatre, and Scherban and others were fired from their day jobs at state-run theatres.



Photo: Vladimir Shlapak

FREEDIMENSIONAL. The goal of freeDimensional (fD) is to support culture in the service of free expression, justice, and equality. freeDimensional values artists as communicators and vanguards on a range of critical issues, and community art spaces as sites of innovation that can provide a range of solutions. Based on the belief that creative expression fuels social justice movements, freeDimensional works with the global arts community and art spaces in 70 countries to identify and redistribute resources, and support meaningful relationships between art spaces and activists. This includes protecting critical voices by providing safe haven in artist residency apartments through the Creative Safe Haven program, and quick-response funding through the Creative Resistance Fund. By providing a range of support to people using creativity to fight injustice, fD sends a message to repressive regimes and people who misuse their power that culture workers will not be silenced without the international community taking note and coming to their defense.



Each year, hundreds of culture workers are violently assaulted for pursuing social change through their art forms. As community leaders and role models, they lose their jobs, face arbitrary imprisonment, and are sometimes killed for speaking truth to power. Through its Distress Services, freeDimensional provides opportunities for threatened culture workers to continue their creative practice.

We first met the founders of Belarus Free Theatre, Natalia and Nikolai, in Lund, Sweden, in March 2009, where their company was hosted by a local theater for the production and presentation of *Eurepica*. In 2010, we learned that the company would be performing at the Theatre Without Borders conference *Acting Together* in New York City and invited it to participate in a Critical Dialogue. Critical Dialogue is a fD process linking advocates, policy makers, and the general public with an activist or culture worker passing through New York City. We hosted a three-day retreat for the company in conjunction with our upstate New York partner, Ledig House at the Omi International Arts Center, and included Svetlana Mintcheva, director of programs at the National Coalition Against Censorship, and additional fD staff. We also held a Political Salon public discussion at the World Policy Institute and saw Belarus Free

Theatre perform at La MaMa Experimental Theatre. This Bridge Conversation is an extension of this dialogue.

In early 2005, Belarus was listed by the United States as Europe's only remaining 'outpost of tyranny'. Opposition figures are subjected to harsh penalties for organizing protests, and anyone in the country who expresses criticism or just the desire to be free and creative finds her or himself confronted with various kinds of repression ranging from threats of imprisonment and legal and social harassment to social and economic exclusion, censorship, job loss, physical threat, and violent attack. The country became independent in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

More than a decade later, international isolation continues and the nature of political links with Russia remains a key issue for the dictatorship. For much of his career, President Lukashenko has tried to develop closer ties with Belarus's neighbor to the north with one outcome being Belarus's privileged access to duty-free oil. Since 2008, the European Union (EU) has started a dialogue with the Belarus government (through the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council and Prague Eastern Partnership Summit, for example). The West's new will to cooperate with Belarus might be inspired by Russia's role as a major energy supplier to the rest of Europe and Belarus's position as a key transit country. Being this transit country as well as the buffer state between Europe and Russia makes it difficult for the EU to put pressure on Belarus—even if the EU member-states pretend to support Belarus's transition to democracy.

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NATALIA KOLIADA: All theatres in Belarus are state-owned. The directors and creative directors are appointed by the Ministry of Culture. The performances are censored and the programs are old and musty.

FREEDIMENSIONAL: You offer a program based on contemporary/modern plays that are celebrated all over the world. Does your artistic quality offer you the powerful voice that then works as a political tool?

NIKOLAI KHALEZIN: We don't consider our performances to be political. We don't claim to have a political agenda, but we do art, high-quality art, an art that highly affects the political system.

KOLIADA: There's no politics in the play, but there is something that is threatening to a dictatorship: open conversation. The dictatorship says: We have no suicide, no alcoholism, no drug abuse. And we say: We have to talk if we want to solve problems.

[For example, Belarus Free Theatre's piece *Numbers* shares statistical details of living conditions in Belarus.]

FREEDIMENSIONAL: You mean, is it threatening to the dictatorship to be confronted with any form of individual artistic expression that illustrates present-day dilemmas?

KOLIADA: Yes, exactly. Because it challenges the ideological system of the Belarusian dictatorial regime. With our performances we break through stereotypes of the Belarusian population that the dictator imposes. That inspires

the people to reflect on their situation, encourages them to resist the lies that Lukashenko tells, makes them become critical.

FREEDIMENSIONAL: Is there any chance at all for the people in Belarus to start to organize a resistance movement?

KOLIADA: The problem is that there are no longer ways to communicate without censorship. The government starts to control the Internet, as has already happened in China. Everything is under the control of the dictatorship. Nikolai, whom you can call an experienced dissident, was a journalist for three newspapers that were all shut down, and he was sent to prison a few times. The police are so strong: if people went on the streets to demonstrate, there would immediately be the same number of policemen. It's a surveillance society, and you never know whom you can trust. Our mobiles are cut, and it's nearly impossible to inform the interested people where they can see our performances.

*There's no politics in the play,
but there is something that is
threatening to a dictatorship:
open conversation.*

FREEDIMENSIONAL: So it is probably a very special sign for you that people come to see you even though they are prohibited?

KOLIADA AND KHALEZIN: Yes, that is a good sign for the whole society. The audience comes even though it is threatened; sometimes policemen or some KGB guys arrive to film the faces of the people in the audience. In 2007, our whole company and 50 audience members were arrested during a performance. We take a lot of risks. We know that they could make us disappear just when we take the garbage downstairs. Even though we are afraid for our families we all stand together to fight for our art and freedom. My daughter once hid the USB stick with our data when we crossed the border. I was so afraid for her; can you imagine such a climate in which your young children know to hide the laptop computers when a stranger comes to the door. Despite the pressure and harassments, we manage to deliver cutting-edge performances, and we will fight for our right to do so until Lukashenko's regime comes to an end.

FREEDIMENSIONAL: That's why it is so important for you to reach people outside of Belarus in order to make political change there more possible?

KOLIADA: Yes, our major goal is to get more publicity about the situation in Belarus, to make people all around the world aware of this last European dictatorship.

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By performing all around the world, explaining again and again to people in western countries where they perform, Natalia and Nikolai raise awareness about the situation of Belarus. It is due to its artistic work that the Belarus Free

Theatre is noticed and recognized internationally. And it is due to the quality of its performances that people from all around the world listen to Natalia and Nikolai's stories from Belarus and then take action. Famous playwrights and world figures like Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter, and Václav Havel have supported the Free Theatre. In 2007, Belarus Free Theatre also met Mick Jagger, who promised to give the first concert in a democratic Belarus in a YouTube clip shared virally in Belarus until the site went down due to oversubscription or state censorship. And in 2009, Belarus Free Theatre visited Steven Spielberg in Los Angeles, who shared others' concerns regarding the violations of freedoms of speech, expression, and religion in Belarus.

Not only do these celebrities shed light on an underreported situation (and offer hope to the people of Belarus), they also afford protection against even more drastic repressive measures from the Belarusian authorities who cannot blackmail culture makers the way they do politicians. The performances of Belarus Free Theatre are packed with strong imagery and experimentation; they captivate the audience and make each spectator reflect on how to contribute to change the situation in Belarus, to make it a place where artists and intellectuals are not persecuted because they express themselves freely.

In the above interview, we get a hint of some tactics that Belarus Free Theatre engages through its hybrid art activism. When Natalia was telling the story of hiding the flash drive on her daughter, she lamented on having to take such dire measures. Other tactics include never mentioning President Lukashenko within a performance. When traveling, they often cross the border into Lithuania by car and fly out of Vilnius to reduce the surveillance they are subjected to in Minsk. Nikolai is also a journalist, and he has helped to start an online news service pertaining to Belarus called Charter 97, which is not linked to the Theatre's website. Similarly, for a campaign to not forget the disappeared, Natalia and Nikolai helped orchestrate a street-style alternative distribution plan of a book of testimonies from family members. This book did not mention the Theatre and also stated 'published in EU' to obfuscate any relation to a Belarusian publishing house.



POSTSCRIPT: Since this Bridge Conversation was written, Lukashenko was re-elected. The government cracked down on dissent following the flawed election, and more than 600 writers, journalists, and opposition activists were arrested, including Natalia, Nikolai, and other members of their theatre. When they were released, Natalia and Nikolai went into hiding and ultimately came to New York, where they performed *Being Harold Pinter* at the Under the Radar Festival to standing room audiences, receiving critical acclaim. The PEN American Center held a benefit for them, a demonstration of solidarity with writers and artists, such as Tom Stoppard, on the eve of their return to Belarus. The Public Theater and Amnesty International joined in a demonstration outside of the Belarus Mission to the United Nations.