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Insulted. Belarus. Worldwide Read Ings by Andrei Kureichik
(review)

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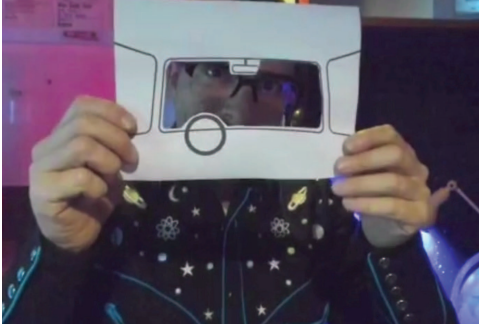
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Screenshot of Thaddeus Phillips as himself in *Zoo Motel*, holding the cut-out of “Online Drive-in Car” featured in the digital welcome pack sent to the audience before the performance.

dimensional, it allowed us to enter into the world within the frame, even as it imposed itself as yet another frame on top of other frames.

The virtual space of our rooms continued to transform when Phillips brought us to the Otsuchi wind phone, set up to allow visitors to communicate with the dead. He suggested that we put down the cutout, get out of the car, and “come out to the beach and look.” The game of make-believe leveled up. Without the help of any other material at hand to bring us in, we needed to rely upon our own imaginations to insert ourselves virtually into the scene. The wall and picture frame, which we could clearly see, were temporarily outside this virtual world. The black telephone, although visibly disconnected, connected us to impossible invisible voices, and the hundreds of telephone-book pages, although blank, were virtually imprinted with the names of lost ones all-too-present in our minds. The material became a stepping stone from which the virtual took flight, and the stage, although physically distant, became, in imagination, a shared place between the performer and the audience members.

The action in *Zoo Motel* often revolved around close-up reading and intimate manipulation of material objects. The play also teemed with mediating technologies of all kinds—telephone, typewriter, record player, film screen—and the actor often communicated through written words, paper objects, and recorded sounds rather than direct speech. These forms of mediation, when used creatively, became powerful tools that stretched the possibilities of our imagination and trained our minds to build virtual connections whose effects were no less real. In the end the door to the room reappeared, and the crossed-out theatre projects in the notebook turned into stages illuminated by ghost lights. *Zoo Motel*

was a rumination on theatre as a place that is both material and virtual, immediate and mediated. Like the ghost light always on when a theatre is closed, this production was a technological means to keep theatre alive even when we are not there.

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INSULTED. BELARUS. WORLDWIDE READINGS. By Andrei Kureichik. Coordinated by John Freedman. November 14, 2020.

Om’Oba Jerry Adesewo, artistic director of the Arojah Royal Theatre, greeted Belarusian playwright Andrei Kureichik with “Welcome to Nigeria!” via Zoom for his company’s reading of Kureichik’s *Insulted. Belarus*. Adesewo’s company joined an international reading series, stretching from Los Angeles to Hong Kong, of Kureichik’s play about the brutal crackdown on the 2020 pro-democracy movement in Belarus, hoping to spread awareness and build solidarity for the movement. Amid the pandemic, the actors of the Arojah Royal Theatre convened through their cellphones and laptops, seated in empty stairwells, outside their buildings, and in shared domestic spaces in which to read the new play.

In mid-September 2020, a month following widely contested presidential elections in Belarus, Kureichik and English-language translator John Freedman launched the worldwide readings of *Insulted. Belarus*. Kureichik wrote the documentary play after fleeing Belarus as a member of the Coordination Council opposing the ongoing dictatorship of Aliaksandr Lukashenka in support of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, believed to be the legitimate winner of the elections. Kureichik’s play maps events leading up to the election and the brutal crackdown of Lukashenka’s regime through a series of monologues, short scenes, and fragments. The six characters represent Lukashenka (Oldster), his son (Youth), Lukashenka (Novice), imprisoned opposition leader Maria Kalesnikava (Cheerful), murdered protestor Aliaksandr Taraiouski (Corpse), a Ukrainian riot police officer (Avian/Raptor), and an election official loyal to Lukashenka (Mentor).

In Nigeria, the Arojah company gave a gripping, ensemble reading of the performance. In the post-show discussion, one participant said in a chat, “This just reminds me of the Nigerian situation.” At another moment in the discussion, Adesewo likened events to the US presidential election that had just taken place and was still being contested. In talk-



Ales Malchanau as Corpse in Arlekin Players Theatre reading of *Insulted. Belarus*.

backs and chat boxes around the world, similar comparisons were made as the play tapped into global concerns over diminishing democracy, increasing police brutality, and crackdowns on peaceful protests. Some productions and readings of the play overtly highlighted these parallels through casting, video footage, or design elements, while others, like the Arojah's, allowed the resonances to emerge without comment. The play's broad international reach demonstrates the potential of art in building a network of advocates for the democratic opposition in Belarus and thinking through the ways in which societies around the world face similar uphill battles against oppressive regimes.

Readings of the play via Zoom in the United States and United Kingdom took off in mid-September amid coronavirus isolation protocols. Boston's Arlekin Players Theatre, which won an international following with its remarkable participatory Zoom production of *State vs. Natasha Banina*, presented *Insulted. Belarus*. several times in Russian and English live via Zoom and Facebook. Under the direction of Igor Golyak, the actors, using black-and-white filters, spare backgrounds, and individual character props like apples, flowers, and flags, captured the playfulness in Kureichik's character introductions, the bewilderment of the post-election gaslighting,



Oleksandr Lyubchenko as Oldster in Mikola Kulish Academic Theatre's premiere production of *Insulted, Belarus*. (Photo: Vadim Gnidash.)

the horror of the violence against protestors, and the resistant hope in the play's conclusion. In one powerful presentation by the group, Belarus-based actor Ales Malchanau joined the live performance as Corpse on October 18, 2020. Positioned before a window that looked out over Minsk, Malchanau's cinematic performance displayed the full range of his character through distilled physical action and vocal dexterity. He moved gracefully from a boisterous and energetic hockey fan to a committed freedom fighter, wrapping himself in the historical white-red-white flag of the opposition, to a still, heartbroken, and gentle wounded warrior. The abrupt tonal shifts in the script and the Arlekin Players Theatre's performances captured the state of confusion in the rapidly shifting reality in Belarus following the August election.

The number of readings of the play globally attests to its resonance. According to Freedman, by February 10, 2021 the play had been translated into twenty languages and presented as digital and live readings, staged readings, live productions, and streamed recorded productions over 140 times. The first fully staged production premiered at the Mikola Kulish Academic Theatre in Kherson, Ukraine, on October 1, staged by Sergei Pavlyuk. Pavlyuk, freely editing the play and drawing distinctive lines of good and evil, divided the stage into a bombastic regime side, where a skeleton sat at a small table with the old leader, and an opposition side with only a small wooden lectern and white-red-white flag. Video screens on both sides blasted documentary footage, video games, and dizzying video of the characters speaking. On the opposition's screens, images from the independent Nexta conflicted with the Belarus Channel 1 State Media images. A ridiculous dictator and his buffoons physically and aurally dominated the stage throughout the performance, but the tone shifted significantly when Mentor realigned herself with the opposition. As the production ended, both video screens turned

to flags of the opposition, and the full cast raised a huge white-red-white flag in solidarity. This moment of solidarity was repeated in various ways in the many readings and productions, creating a global pro-democracy network of artists.

In sharp contrast to Pavlyuk's stark theatricality, the first film of the work, "a cinematic reading," directed by Oksana Mysina, relies upon nuanced, subtle acting and poetic filmmaking. The film, featuring legendary Russian actress and human rights advocate Liya Akhedzhakova as Cheerful, premiered on the Russian television station Rain on November 12, 2020. Filmed with COVID protocols, the actors appear stationed in non-distinct interior and exterior spaces, initially signaling the work as a reading of the play. Through elegant sound and video montage editing of documentary and impressionistic natural footage, the film creates a rhythm that illuminates the unsettled environment as it grows increasingly dangerous and fractured. Urgent, impatient honking transitions to machine-gun fire and heavy rain as the camera closes in on the piercingly cruel eyes of the riot policeman and a chilling close-up on Oldster. The film ends, as many readings have, on a note of resolve, following Kureichik's suggested use of the Belarusian version of the protest song, "Destroy the Prison Walls." With over 400,000 viewings of the play in its various formats, it continues to reverberate across the globe, gaining international support for pro-democratic Belarus and providing a platform for resistance to the diminishment of democracy throughout the world.

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EVERYBODY'S TALKING ABOUT JAMIE.

Book and lyrics by Tom MacRae, music by Dan Gillespie Sells. Directed by Jonathan Butterell and Shim Sul-in (local director). Shownote Incorporated, LG Arts Center, Seoul. September 10, 2020.

After a year had passed since the outbreak of COVID-19, the pandemic took a devastating toll on theatre worldwide. But live performances continued in South Korea without any recorded cases of audience-to-audience transmission of the coronavirus as of February 2021. Simply by keeping its door open, South Korea's musical industry made global headlines, including via BBC News and the *New York Times*, which praised the country's ability to stage the international touring production of *The Phantom of the Opera* at full capacity between March