

# THE BELARUS FREE THEATRE: PERFORMING RESISTANCE AND DEMOCRACY

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**Abstract** || This article examines the struggle between the dictatorship of the Lukashenko government and the Belarus Free Theatre over performance space in Minsk. As a performance of power, the state restricts the ability of the Free Theatre to perform in Minsk, forcing them to stage their theatre underground. The Belarus Free Theatre counters this censorship by enacting a form of 'performative resistance' that redefines modes of political participation and facilitates the creation of democratic spaces through the event of their performances.

**Keywords** || Public Space | Dictatorship | Theatre | Performative Resistance.

Since 1994, the government of Alexander Lukashenko has restricted rights such as free speech and assembly in public places in Belarus. Various individuals have been jailed, or 'disappeared,' for voicing their dissent. It is within this context that the Belarus Free Theatre has begun work on breaking the veil of silence imposed by the Lukashenko regime.

To this end, this study posits the questions: what is the specific nature of theatre's power to compete with the state's performance of power? And how do issues of public versus private space play out in the struggle for resisting state censorship and establishing an alternative national identity? To understand the ways in which the Belarus Free Theatre constructs this resistance, this study will seek to define the power relationships existing between the Free Theatre and the state, and the notion of 'performance' with regards to this subject-power relationship.

Alexander Lukashenko's rise to power in Belarus' first elections after Soviet independence was unexpected. Despite entering the presidential race late, Lukashenko managed to win the elections with 80 per cent of the vote by capturing the masses with denunciations of those he deemed responsible for falling standards of living (Mihalisko, 1997: 254). At the time, the majority of the Belarusian population was primarily concerned with economic instability, and according to Kathleen Mihalisko, "Lukashenko's rule is a logical outcome of the population's entrenched Soviet mentality and widespread nostalgia for the relative prosperity and stability of the old system" (1997: 259).

However, once elected, President Lukashenko swiftly began a program of power consolidation by targeting various mass media outlets. In July 1996, over 200 newspapers in the country had to be registered with the government (Marples, 1999: 81). He attacked media outlets with fines, tax audits, and threats of beatings by the secret police for non-compliance, and made "orgies of street democracy", essentially protests of a hundred people or more, illegal (Marples, 1999: 81). The same month, Lukashenko made a startling move towards dictatorship when he sought to amend the 1994 Constitution. The proposed changes granted Lukashenko power to dissolve parliament if it failed to elect his chosen candidate as Prime Minister, and removed the right of parliament to veto his selection of top ranking ministers (Marples, 1999: 89). He also appointed "judges, the officials of the Central Electoral Commission and half the members of the Constitutional Court" (Marples, 1999: 89). A November Referendum effectively extended Lukashenko's term, and despite threats of impeachment after Referendum voting, "candidates elected to office were not permitted to enter the 110-seat assembly" (Marples, 1999: 98). Historian David Marples explains, "[a] presidential power grab [had] thus been completed through a

quasi-legal framework. The process was blatantly undemocratic, but the forces against the president quickly collapsed” (1999: 97).

One force that continues to rally against the Lukashenko regime is the Belarus Free Theatre. Founded in 2005 by husband and wife Nikolai Khalezin and Natalia Koliada and director Vladmir Scherban, the Free Theatre concerns itself with exposing the everyday realities behind official state narratives. The Theatre engages with issues deemed taboo by the state, as well as publically engaging with closeted topics such as the stories of journalists and political opposition members who have been disappeared.

The Free Theatre is unable to perform legally in Belarus. Most theatres are state-owned and closely monitored by the Ministry of Culture, which appoints artistic staff based on approval by the head of state (Belarus Free Theatre, 2005). The censorship found in the theatre in Belarus is reminiscent of the Soviet era<sup>1</sup>. Co-founder Nikolai Khalezin explains how extreme the measures by the Ministry of Culture can be, saying:

State theatres cannot take up a new play without the Ministry of Culture's agreement, it means without the play being censored. Moreover, the first-night is attended by a person from the Ministry, who sees and decides whether the play fits or not. (Elkin, 2007)

Currently, Khalezin's plays have all been banned from performance in Belarus, regardless of their content (Elkin, 2007). He says that the Ministry is continuously looking for new plays to stage, because they feel there are not enough Belarusian plays in the repertoires of State theatres. Yet, Khalezin states,

[the] list of authors whose plays cannot be staged is growing all the time. Today all the best playwrights are on the list. The Ministry of Culture makes it difficult for playwrights to stage anything other than classical dramas, most of which are performed without obtaining the proper rights or paying royalties. (Elkin, 2007)

Non-state theatres face numerous restrictions in their ability to organize and perform. Most companies attempting to operate from outside the umbrella of the state theatre are blocked by legislation. The legal difficulties facing the Belarus Free Theatre are manifold, but consist of several main points outlined in Presidential Decree No. 542, which bars the company from obtaining official status as a theatre group. According to this decree, in order to perform, a group must apply to the Ministry of Culture to be recognized as a theatre company; if successful, they are then bestowed with a title and a designation of either a 'people's', 'exemplary' or 'academic' theatre by the government and Ministry of Culture. Only after this title has been conferred will the company be able to produce theatre on stage. The

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1 | See Choldin and Friedberg (eds.), 1989; Eaton (ed.), 2002; Stourac and McCreery 1986; Goldfarb 1976.

sole organisations exempt from this legislation are those owned by the state, or those owning their own stage (President of the Republic of Belarus, 2010).

The same decree also lists the type of cultural events which are prohibited from production, the themes of which include: anything that promotes war, violates copyright, or threatens national security, morals, civil order, the health of the population and the rights of citizens (President of the Republic of Belarus, 2010). As these themes are highly subjective and open to interpretation by law enforcement, Free Theatre productions can be refused by authorities on any of these grounds. Co-founder Natalia Koliada says, “[w]e discovered 21 taboo zones during our very first master class, ranging from suicide, sexual minorities, religion, World War Two, politics, enforced disappearances, and political prisoners. Just think of a topic and that will be a taboo zone in Belarus” (Fairweather, 2008).

The first play that the Free Theatre chose to stage in 2005, *4.48 Psychosis* by British dramatist Sarah Kane, was rejected for performance by twenty-seven venues (Cavendish, 2011). Koliada often shares the story of how one of the Ministry of Culture censors responded to their request to stage the piece:

“You can’t show it [*4.48 Psychosis*] because there is no depression in Belarus,” he explained.

“We’re not saying there is. Sarah Kane was British, so if any government is being criticised it is the British government.”

The censor was stumped but rallied with: “Ah, but people who see the play may think that there is depression in Belarus—even though there isn’t—so I’m still banning it.” (Cohen, 2010)

Because of the restriction on information introduced through the Lukashenko government’s tight control over media and the internet, discussing these issues openly in the theatre is illegal.

Without the right to become an officially recognised theatre group, the Free Theatre is forced to perform underground in Minsk, staging performances in private houses and apartments, and, on several occasions, in the woods. In order to avoid interference from police, prospective audience members are given a phone number to call and are kept on waiting lists whereby they are alerted by a text shortly before a performance as to the whereabouts of the venue (Fairweather, 2008). Typically, the Free Theatre performs in a run-down suburb of Minsk. Their main performance space was lent to the Company by a friend, who knocked down a wall in his home to join the two rooms now comprising their stage. The floors are painted black, with whitewashed walls, and the windows are covered with



pieces of cardboard (Walker, 2011). Only fifty audience members can see a performance at once, and there is a minimum of two intermissions because of the difficulty of so many people breathing in such a confined space (Ravenhill, 2008). Due to the official rejection of the Free Theatre's status as a company, all of their performances are free. Koliada explains, "If we sell one ticket we would be sent to jail for two to six years" (Gener, 2009: 67). Instead, a bucket is placed next to the door for audience members to contribute whatever they can (Walker, 2011).

While the Belarus Free Theatre is accustomed to interference by officials, in August of 2007, a Minsk performance of Edward Bond's *11 Vests* was raided by the KGB. Special forces stormed into the Free Theatre's performance space and arrested fifty people, including the actors, Free Theatre founders, and audience members (Petz, 2007).

The move by the Ministry of Culture to force the Free Theatre underground highlights an ideological battle played out between artists and the state over public space. Writing about his theatre practice in postcolonial Kenya in the 1970s, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o investigates the issues of performance space in the public and private spheres. According to Ngũgĩ, "the war between art and the state is really a struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state" (1997: 12). So long as the Free Theatre is committed to presenting alternative accounts of life in Belarus, they destabilize a carefully constructed narrative by the state, therefore challenging both its power and legitimacy.

Natalia Koliada has spoken extensively about how the Belarus Free Theatre aims to break through the official narratives of the Lukashenko regime in order to bring to light the realities of life in Belarus. On the 'Theatre' section of their website, [dramaturg.org](http://dramaturg.org), they state, "[t]he main aim of the performances is to break through stereotypes of the Belarusian population that are imposed by the ideological system of Belarusian dictatorial regime [sic]" (Rodriguez, 2006). Koliada has simply stated that "the very basic idea was just to say whatever we think, whenever and wherever and to whom we want, by means of art" (Murphy, 2011).

The Free Theatre believes that the National Theatre in Belarus is currently being used to work against progressive thinking in the country's population (Murphy, 2011). Vladimir Scherban has been vocal about the problems currently facing mainstream Belarusian theatre. He finds that much of the contemporary art produced in the National Theatres has become banal, saying "even in the 60s and 70s [during the Soviet period] the theatre enjoyed greater demand and provoked greater resonance in the society. Today everything is about the expensiveness of one's garments, luxury of decorations...

everything that has little if anything to do with real art” (Makovskaya, 2007). Koliada shares this sentiment, as she believes it is the artistic aesthetic in Belarus that needs to be addressed:

This is absolutely the main point for us, because when we organised the theatre, we decided that it should be aesthetic opposition first of all. If we have a high standard of aesthetic opposition that we have, we could change aesthetically a society, and when we have such an artistic product then we could attract more attention for political changes, if we have an artistic voice [sic]. (Williams, 2009)

The Free Theatre devises their scripts through a process they have termed ‘Total Immersion’, as they are based on the lived experiences of their members. In one session I attended, at the Almeida Theatre in London, we began the process by retrieving an object we carried around every day from our bags and explaining why this was important to us. We were then asked to associate a story with it—the best or worst moment we had had with this particular object. From techniques such as this, Natalia, Nikolai and Vladimir led us in delving deeply into the issues raised to draw out stories about our personal fears and troubles. A keychain turned into a narrative about an aunt a young girl thought she might never see again, a pack of paracetamol a story about a woman who suffers from a chronic pain condition. Through this, the Free Theatre sought to locate what they call the ‘Most Important Subject’, which they use to base further artistic exploration on. As the Free Theatre has identified, this shift in aesthetic approach—one that prioritizes the ordinary individual, or citizen, as a storyteller—is a method of political resistance to the modes of cultural production enforced by the state in Belarus. It enables spectators to locate themselves in the wider political landscape and to explore how their first-hand experience is both shaped by, and can shape, socio-political issues.

Koliada believes it is this method of engagement that threatens the Lukashenko regime the most: “We wanted our spectators to think—this, of course, is the most terrifying part for any dictatorship” (Kaliada, 2011). Khalezin says this is why the regime is so opposed to their activities. He explains, “[t]hey react hysterically... They do not just ignore—they actively resist” (Elkin, 2007). The resistance by the state is a reaction to the resistance performed by the Belarus Free Theatre, who continue to tell their stories despite the increasing restrictions on their ability to perform freely.

The shift toward first-person storytelling enables the Free Theatre to present narratives that challenge those authorized in the public sphere, and to use performance as a way to engage with taboos in order to “speak the issues that the audience keeps silent on” (Kaliada, 2011). Their play, *Zone of Silence*, seeks to break the silences enforced by the Lukashenko regime and speak truths of

its own. *Zone of Silence*, which premiered in 2008, is a three-part Belarusian 'epic' that explores the everyday realities of life in Minsk. The Free Theatre divided the piece into what they term Chapters; the first entitled "Childhood Legends", in which the actors of the Free Theatre tell stories from their childhood. Chapter two, entitled "Diverse", shares the stories of people living on the margins of society in contemporary Minsk, while the final Chapter, "Numbers", is a collection of various statistics on Belarus, such as the number of annual suicides, infant mortality rates, and figures on unemployment which are acted out by the Free Theatre company.

Chapter two, "Diverse", was developed through a technical assignment for the Free Theatre actors, in which they were asked "to go to the city to find people who differ from the general public" (DelSignore, 2011). Koliada says they were motivated as directors to seek out these narratives because in Belarus people "[do not] accept people who are different from the general public. It was an idea to explode those topics and issues that are closed by the society and you can't talk about them openly" (DelSignore, 2011).

Each actor was given a camcorder and, in addition to finding and interviewing an individual, was asked to film their subject to gain a sense of their character. The stories that the actors gathered were used to create a documentary piece of theatre, with characters and scenes that describe alternative narratives of life in Minsk. We meet Zhukov, a disabled man who, with a sarcastic smirk, tells us he lost his hands trying to climb over an electric fence. Shrouded in darkness, with a dim spotlight, he sits on a chair to the left of the stage, answering questions about how he became a famous guitar player despite having no hands. Adopting Zhukov's physicality, actor Denis Tarasenko uses only bent arms to pick up an electric guitar and plays a rock riff using his elbows. As he plays, and the piece closes, a projection shows the 'real' Zhukov sitting in a shadowy studio with headphones on enjoying the music.

Next is the story of Marat, who enters wearing a black mask, which he removes after entering his flat. He begins to undress, and tells us his story: that his mother was Belarusian and his father African, that he grew up in an orphanage, and after coming out was often beaten for being openly gay. He paces about during his monologue, worrying about someone coming to the door, explaining that he does not have much money to pay his rent. A video of Marat shows him walking through a crowd in the train station, visibly standing out amongst people who are avoiding his gaze.

Yet another story describes Kalantai, an older woman wholly dedicated to the Communist party and the protection of workers' rights, who has strong feelings of affection for Lenin. Dressed head



to toe in red she marches on to the stage, proudly singing the Soviet anthem before passing out Communist literature amongst audience members. She speaks fondly of her upbringing in a children's home, firmly believing that children now have far more than they need. Her dedication to the rights of the proletariat moved her to jam her hand into a piece of unsafe machinery to demonstrate to the factory managers the dangers of not adhering to safety protocol. A video clip shows her proudly marching through Minsk, trying to 'paint the town red.'

In "Numbers", statistics are brought to life with nothing but the actors and a few props. Vladimir Scherban's vision was to ask the actors to "fill, by their bodies, what is happening in Belarus in terms of statistics" (DelSignore, 2011). "Numbers" opens with three men walking out on to the stage, each holding an instrument, with one trailing a suitcase. They stand, smiling at the audience, each waiting for the other to speak. They struggle, smile and turn to the next person looking to them to speak. As they do, a subtitle appears with the statistic: 72 per cent of Belarusians find it hard to define the word 'democracy'. Another segment shows a young woman blowing up a balloon and sticking it up her dress, becoming pregnant. She walks around the stage holding her distended belly, until she lies on the floor and gives birth to her large red baby, whom she plays with briefly before miming that she is burdened by it. The same sequence repeats, but this time, instead of giving birth, the young woman runs into the wall, trying to pop the balloon. She tries pushing herself onto the ground writhing around, which eventually works to 'pop' her belly. When she stands up, small red pieces of rubber fall from her dress while a statistic tells us that 64,730 abortions took place the previous year and about 2,000 desired pregnancies resulted in stillbirth. Koliada explains: "It took a lot of time to produce this particular piece because it's very complicated to find numbers, statistics, about what's going on in Belarus. The government doesn't want to issue these statistics" (DelSignore, 2011). Another of the Free Theatre's plays that premiered in 2008, *Discover Love*, tackles one of the major issues the government does not want Belarusians, or the international community, to know about—enforced disappearances.

As with most of their productions, the play is based on the personal story of Natalia Koliada and Nikolai Khalezin's friend Irina whose husband was kidnapped and disappeared. *Discover Love* combines the love story of Irina and Anatoly, who are affectionately referred to as Ira and Tolya in the production, with similar stories of political violence and disappearances in Asia and South America (Gener, 2009: 68). Though Belarusian officials deny any involvement in the disappearances of individuals such as Anatoly Krasovsky, the play explicitly links these disappearances in Belarus with disappearances perpetrated by the state elsewhere in the world.

The piece opens with a track recorded by British DJ, MC Coppa, who reads a portion of the UN Convention against Enforced Disappearances. The lights come up and reveal the stage, sparsely set with only a mattress, a sturdy wooden chair, and a dartboard nailed to the back stage wall. The majority of the play centres on Ira telling the story of her life. It begins with her speaking of her childhood crushes and her memories from school. Ira tells us of her first encounters with Anatoly, who was her physics teacher, but whom she only began seeing seriously after she finished her studies. She describes her intense infatuation with him—his hair and the colour of his eyes—as actor Oleg Sidorchik, playing Tolya, sweeps her up into a waltz. They lock gazes as they glide across the stage to an up-tempo piece of music.

Ira's story continues by describing the challenges of married life: Anatoly's business ventures and the hardships of being apart as her postsecondary studies take her to Moscow. She also speaks of other difficult times: financial uncertainties and her attraction to another man which makes her question her marriage. There are minimal props to assist her telling, yet each chapter of her life is marked by the removal and replacement of different quilts on her bed, one from early childhood, one from adolescence, one from when she first meets Tolya, and several that mark the stages in the development of their relationship together. The patterns of each of Ira's 'memory quilts'<sup>2</sup> are projected on a cyclorama to guide us visually through her life.

In the final scene, in which Anatoly does not return home from work one evening, Ira sits upstage on the wooden chair, recounting her worries as she continues to wait. Tolya narrates his story to us; he was driving to the health spa with his business partner Victor. When they got out of the car they were both attacked from behind and knocked unconscious. As he does so, his attacker, played by actor Pavel Gorodnitski, carries out the instantaneous destruction of the Krasovsky's domestic life. The masked man rips one of Ira's quilts off of the bed and tosses it aside. He picks up several scattered oranges, which in a previous scene were precious gifts for Irina, and viciously bites a chunk out of them. He squeezes their juices all over Tolya's face, turning them into blood running down his head after a brutal beating. The executioner throws the mattress aside to reveal four cars tyres which he lines up in the shape of a cross before forcing Tolya to his knees and dunking his head in a bucket of water over and over. Tolya breaks free, his movements suggesting running away while his attacker pulls out a whip that makes the sound of gunshots. Tolya is 'hit' three times before he falls onto the tires. The thug, his job done, exits offstage, leaving Tolya to utter the words "And then I died", before relaxing his body to its final resting position. Ira moves towards Tolya, and he awakens, speaking to her from beyond the

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2 | Memory quilts are derived from American folk art and typically consist of fabrics from various phases of life (pieces of baby blankets, wedding dresses, etc.) stitched together as a visual reminder of significant events in one's life. Ira's quilts function in a similar way, but here each fabric quilt marks a distinct phase of her life.

grave, telling her she is going to be all right. The moment dissolves into the actors recounting stories of other disappearances across the globe. The cyclorama displays pictures of numerous individuals who have gone missing, as well as acts of protest by family members whose loved ones have disappeared.

The choice to allow Tolya to claim his story by narrating it carries political significance as a representation of the ‘disappeared’ who have been literally silenced by the regime through their death. His telling illuminates information hidden by the state, and his representation in the act of performance gives him agency beyond his death by filling a void of information on his disappearance with a story that reveals the violence performed by the state. Both *Zone of Silence* and *Discover Love* perform an important function in facilitating democratic spaces whereby both actors and spectators can interrogate and reconstruct national narratives, particularly those whose existence the government denies. These performance work to deconstruct political subjects as defined by the state, and reconstitute a new subjectivity, which includes the experiences and perspectives of those who do not fit in with official hegemonic narratives. It is for this reason the Belarus Free Theatre both offers great hope for instigating political change, and poses a great threat to the stability of a regime that is founded on a population that has been taught to look away.

In order to further understand how the Free Theatre threaten the Lukashenko regime through their art, I must return to Ngũgĩ’s statement that: “The war between art and the state is really a struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state” (1997: 12). We know the Free Theatre perform an alternative aesthetic function to that offered in the National Theatre, and by doing so include voices and stories from the margins that would otherwise not be included in hegemonic national narratives. Yet, why does such a small theatre collective pose such a large threat to the state?

It is for the same reason that the censor would not allow the Belarus Free Theatre to stage their very first performance of *4.48 Psychosis*: not because there is no depression in Belarus, but because people who watch the play might see it and start thinking about the issues of mental health in a dictatorship. Despite the mystifying logic of the Ministry of Culture, what this instance highlights is that the state recognizes the potential of the Free Theatre’s performance—both their plays, and their performance of resistance—as being capable of opening up possible worlds and positing new ways of knowing. That the audience might think that something proposed in performance is *possible*, even if outside of the realm of their direct experience, highlights the very political efficacy the Free Theatre seeks, which the state seeks to control. In order to understand the on-going struggle

between the Free Theatre and the state, we must understand the nature of this struggle and how power, or resistance, is performed.

Michel Foucault, in his essay "The Subject and Power", suggests that we must understand power relations "through the antagonism of strategies," in other words, the different techniques each set of "actors" employ to control the actions of the other. In these relations, forms of power work to "subjugate and make subject to" (1982: 781). In order for it to be a true power relation, according to Foucault, those that are created as subjects within this relation of power must also resist this subjugation, and through their actions reimagine and reconstitute themselves. The relation of power identified between the state and the Free Theatre is one in which the strategy of the state is to create the Free Theatre as its subjects, whilst the Free Theatre simultaneously resist this classification.

This leads to a second important point that Foucault makes, in which he asserts that any true power relation requires the possibility of action on both sides:

A power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that "the other (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible inventions may open up." (1982: 789)

This is the crux of the issue recognized by the Lukashenko government: that each action of repression by the State is met with a new response or reaction of resistance on the part of the Free Theatre.

Yet, it is not only that the Free Theatre attempt to resist the State that threatens the symbolic order, but also in how they choose to do so. Part of the power the Free Theatre holds in the struggle over performance space is the way in which the very *act* of their resistance is performative. Jessica Kulynych's concept of performative action is precipitated by a "character, to which the action refers, as in the theatrical portrayal of a character, [who] only comes into being through the action itself" (1997: 331). In relation to political participation, Kulynych asserts that rather than inhabiting the subjectivity assigned by a relation of power, the "subject" enacts the very thing in which they want to perform and be. In this way, "we see the acting citizen as brought into being by her resistance" (1997: 331). The Belarus Free Theatre continuously perform this type of resistance. Even the process of naming their company the 'Free Theatre' is a performative gesture wherein the company asserts their democratic right to make and perform theatre by doing just that, despite the interference from the authorities. In this way the Free Theatre do not simply present

alternative narratives and suggest possible worlds in the event of their theatrical performances, but they enact new possibilities about the space they can inhabit in the public sphere in Belarus. It is this technique of resistance that Kulynych says “reveals the existence of subjection where we had not previously seen it [and] by unearthing the contingency of the “self-evident”, performative resistance enables politics” (1997: 334). The political engagement the Free Theatre participates in is one which challenges both the state, and the subjectivity imposed upon them by the state. This form of resistance carries with it the greatest potential to destabilize the relations of power with the State as it does not “eliminate power and it is not effected in the name of some subjugated agency, but rather its purpose is disruption and re-creation. It is a reoccurring disruption that ensures an endless reconstitution of power” (Kulynych, 1997: 336).

The project of the Belarus Free Theatre is to wage war with the state by resisting the symbolic order and removing themselves from subject-positions within it in order to disrupt the mechanisms of power used to control their existence. This disruption is what causes the Lukashenko regime to retaliate in increasingly terrifying ways, as it concerns itself with performing its power over the site of performance it holds in its domain: the territory of the nation-state itself. In *Enactments of Power*, Ngũgĩ furthers his argument about the war between the artist and the state by explaining that “The struggle for performance space is integral to the struggle for democratic space and social justice” (1997: 29). The dictatorship in Belarus is a performance of control over what is allowed to be seen, and what can be known. Through their performances, the Free Theatre opens up spaces in which the act of performative resistance and democratic citizenship can be played out. In contrast, the state performs its power by restricting the performance space of the Free Theatre. Ngũgĩ explains:

The nation-state sees the entire territory as its performance area; it organizes the space as a huge enclosure, with definite places of entrance and exit [...] The nation-state performs its own being relentlessly, through its daily exercise of power over the exits and entrances, by means of passports, visas and flags. (1997: 21)

This type of performance concerns itself with policing the public sphere and the “definition, delimitation and regulation” (Ngũgĩ, 1997: 12) of performance space. In its war against the Free Theatre over what can be performed and where, the state looks to “[control and counter] staging, and thus the symbolic messages that are conveyed to attentive audiences” (Parkinson, 2012: 167).

This type of policing is something Jacques Rancière theorizes through what he terms the ‘distribution of the sensible’. The distribution of the



sensible is the “ways in which human communities are spontaneously, counted as whole divisible into their constitutive parts and functions” (2010: 1). Being seen as a subject only in relation to your function imposes designations that draw lines between what is considered to be political and what belongs to the public sphere by delineating who can participate in politics, where they can do so, and in what form. Contrary to this consensus, exists politics which “instead of consisting in an activity whose principle separates its domain out from the social, is an activity that consists only in blurring the boundaries between what is considered political and what is considered proper to the domain of social or private life” (2010: 3). The police, as an apparatus of the state, control what can be seen, and maintain the distribution of the sensible by designating what space is for and what can be considered legitimate political uses of it. Rancière describes the essence of the police as being:

A partition of the sensible that is characterized by the absence of void and of supplement: society here is made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this matching of functions, places and ways of being, there is no place for any void. It is this exclusion of what ‘is not’ that constitutes the police-principles at the core of statist practices. The essence of politics consists in disturbing this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of those without part, identified with the whole of the community. (2010: 36)

The tight control the state maintains over the ‘void’ and ‘supplement’, in other words, marginal ways of seeing and knowing, means that there is no space for the performance of politics. It is this that the Belarus Free Theatre does; they perform politics through their acts of resistance. The Free Theatre disrupts accepted ways of seeing and redefines what must be considered political. Though the Free Theatre have been forced to perform in private apartments as a way to shut them out of the public sphere, they have, through their artistic and aesthetic resistance, redefined the nature of the relationships that take place in such a domestic setting. Though they have been denied a performance space, they have reconfigured the domestic setting they perform into to be an important space of the public sphere, as they deal with issues relating to socio-political issues and experiences in Minsk. Rancière’s definition of politics fits here, as he claims that “[t]he essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to make the world of its subjects and its operations seen. It consists in refiguring space, that is, in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in (2010: 37). The Free Theatre allow this space to be one where democracy is formed so that alternative subjectivities, those including race, disability, sexuality and political liberalism, can be included in the public sphere. Rancière asserts that art, like politics, facilitates a ‘redistribution of the sensible’ which [involves] forms of innovation that tear bodies from their assigned

places and free speech and expression from all reduction to functionality” (2010: 1).

However, while the Belarus Free Theatre have effectively reconfigured private spaces for the performance of their resistance, the issue of the performance of power between the Lukashenko regime and the Free Theatre has been compounded by the relocation of the Free Theatre founders to London. The company’s long standing relationship with trustee Tom Stoppard brought them to seek refuge in the UK, where the Belarus Free Theatre was granted official charity status in 2012. The Free Theatre describes their current operations as a “two-headed beast” as they continue to perform and run their theatre school in Minsk (Belarus Free Theatre, 2012).

Yet, what kind of performance takes place between the state and the artist in exile? Is the expulsion of an artist from the territory of the nation state a victory for and testament to the performance of power by the state? While these questions are beyond the scope of this particular study, they are pertinent when redefining the performance space beyond the territory of the nation state itself.

The threat of imprisonment and violence experienced by the Belarus Free Theatre founders from the KGB has pushed them out of Belarus. Ngũgĩ expresses that it is often the desire of the regime to remove the artist from the territory that nourishes their creativity, hoping that “[their] actions from this enclosure, whatever they are, will not directly affect those confined within the vast territorial enclosure” (1997: 25). However, Ngũgĩ importantly recognizes that “to let an artist go into global space means the continued rivalry for the attention of a global audience. Besides, the word of the exiled may very well travel back to the territory and continue to haunt the state” (1997: 26). With the Belarus Free Theatre firmly occupying a subjectivity in this global space, they only further enact their performatively constituted right to be free and continue to challenge the hegemony of the Lukashenko regime from outside of the physical territory of Belarus.

Whether in Minsk or abroad this is the struggle between the state and the artist: the struggle to perform power and maintain a symbolic order through policing, including violence and censorship on one hand, and the performance of resistance which reconstitutes subjects in a way that allows them to be active, participating citizens on the other. The Belarus Free Theatre, through their commitment to their art and the documentary aesthetic they employ, pose a threat to the state by erupting through the fabric of silence blanketing the population in Belarus. Despite their repression they have harnessed the power of theatre to perform both democracy and freedom.

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