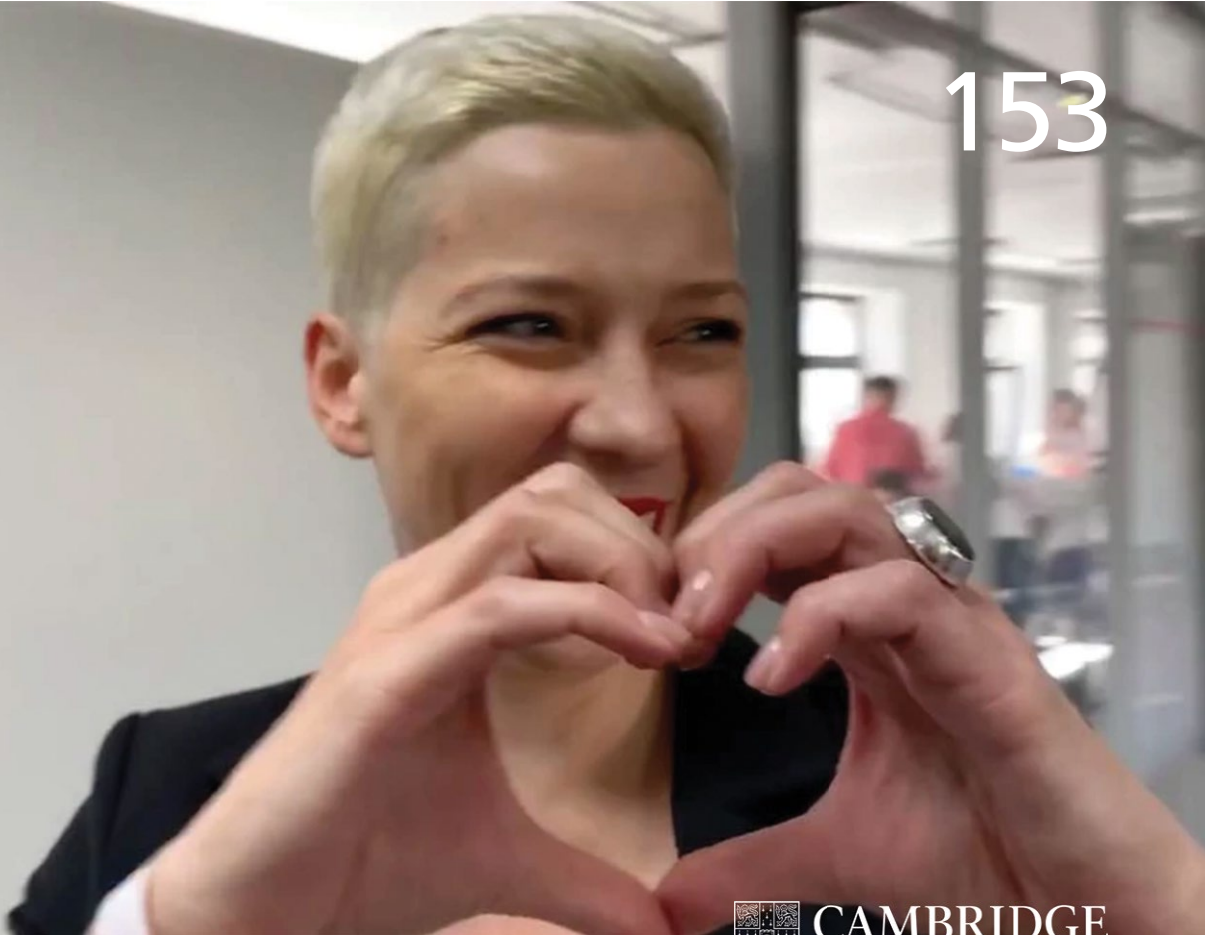


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# NTQ

NEW THEATRE QUARTERLY

153



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BELARUS: WORLDWIDE READINGS IN SOLIDARITY IRAN'S 'THEATRE QUARTERLY'  
(EN)COUNTERING BIAS IN WHITE THEATRE CRITICS EMBODYING 'AFFECT'  
LIFT 2012 AND CULTURAL CO-OPTION 'IN-YER-FACE' TWENTY YEARS ON

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Bryan Brown

# The Translation of Protest: The Worldwide Readings Project of Andrei Kureichyk's *Insulted. Belarus*

On 9 August 2020, Belarus erupted in protest over the falsified election results promoted and endorsed by existing president Aliaksandar Lukashenka. Playwright, director, and member of the Coordination Council for the peaceful transfer of power in Belarus, Andrei Kureichyk was one of the thousands on the streets that month. In early September he finished a new play depicting the events leading up to and surrounding the largest anti-government demonstrations in Belarus's history. Before going into hiding, Kureichyk sent the play, *Insulted. Belarus*, to former Russian theatre critic John Freedman for translation. Together, the two men hoped to have a few theatres in various European and North American countries give a reading of the play in solidarity with the people of Belarus. Neither of them expected that, within two months, the play would be translated into eighteen languages and receive over seventy-seven readings on digital platforms. While many companies were eager to add their name to the global ledger of solidarity, the rise of authoritarianism, as well as the renewed reckoning with systemic racism and sexism in many cultures and countries around the world, additionally meant that many theatres found in the play a vehicle to reflect and comment on their own situations. This article, written by one of the initial participants of the project, attempts to chart how the Worldwide Readings of *Insulted. Belarus* navigated the translation of protest from Belarus to the world. Bryan Brown is Senior Lecturer at the University of Exeter and co-director of visual theatre company ARTEL (American Russian Theatre Ensemble Laboratory) and author of *A History of the Theatre Laboratory* (Routledge, 2019). He is a member of the editorial board of *Theatre Dance and Performance Training*, co-editing the special issue 'Training Places: Dartington College of Arts' (2018).

**Key terms:** solidarity, authoritarianism, Covid-19 pandemic, digital performance, political theatre.

IN THE LATE evening of 9 September 2020, I received a pointed rallying cry via Facebook Messenger from the translator and English-language critic of Russian theatre John Freedman. A few hours earlier he had received a new script from Belarusian playwright and screenwriter Andrei Kureichyk that attempted to capture the first weeks of protest in the country after the falsified elections and refusal of long-time Belarusian president Aliaksandar Lukashenka to concede to the apparent winner Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.<sup>1</sup> The largest anti-government demonstrations in the country's history were met with swift and savage repression.

A member of the Coordination Council for the transfer of power, a group that Lukashenka

was voraciously rounding up, Kureichyk was about to go into hiding and wondered if Freedman might be able to use his network of global theatres 'to get as many readings or productions' done as imminently possible?<sup>2</sup> I, as director of the theatre company ARTEL, along with five other theatre companies Freedman contacted that evening, said yes within minutes, knowing nothing about the play except that it consisted mainly of monologues spoken by seven characters, four of whom were men and three women, and that the Russian version was twenty-six pages long. The immediate confirmation by all six companies further spurred Freedman to translate the work quickly. The Worldwide Readings Project of

Andrei Kureichyk's *Insulted. Belarus* had begun, although none of us knew then just how worldwide the project would eventually become.

To date (6 April 2022), *Insulted. Belarus* has been translated twenty-five times in twenty-two languages, with ten publications. It has had 132 readings with over 215 total events at 110 venues in thirty countries, ranging from the West Coast of the USA to Hong Kong, Nigeria to Sweden.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the Project's participants agreed to stage readings of the play for a variety of reasons: a deep respect for Freedman; an empathic need to support a fellow theatre artist being silenced and hunted; and/or a powerful sense of the injustice being perpetrated on the people of Belarus, and the necessity to stand with them and against the rising tide of authoritarianism around the world.<sup>4</sup> For my part, I had been following the situation in Belarus as closely as I could because it seemed to portend the inevitable for the upcoming November 2020 US elections and a seismic shift in the balance of world powers from democracy to authoritarianism, or what Timothy Snyder, historian of the geographical area that today comprises Belarus, Lithuania, Ukraine, Poland, and parts of Russia, refers to as 'the darkening road to unfreedom'.<sup>5</sup>

Two seemingly antithetical but equally anti-historical positions pave that road: in Snyder's words, 'inevitability' and 'eternity'. In fact, the majority of current world politics is framed by these positions, particularly as they operate to disempower individuals. The first, *inevitability*, is the 'sense that history [can] move in only one direction: toward liberal democracy'.<sup>6</sup> Fuelled by a belief in the nature of markets and institutions, this teleology posits that the fundamental basis of the world will not change: we are headed ever onward towards greater prosperity. The second position, regarding *eternity*, is 'free of any real concern with facts' and makes a shrine to the 'purity of a nation' while simultaneously building a cyclical defence against threat from the outside.<sup>7</sup> Inevitability proposes a future of progress but with no alternative; eternity, an ever-recurring mythical present almost always presided over by a single strong man. Belarus, as one of the three founding

countries of the Soviet Union, has been dominated by a teleology of eternity for over a century, and Aliaksandar Lukashenka has built his regime on the supposition that he is the sole leader capable of defending the country from all outside threats.<sup>8</sup>

'The only thing that stands between inevitability and eternity,' Snyder argues, 'is history, as considered and lived by individuals.'<sup>9</sup> Kureichyk's text, and the very act of writing it, is a testament to the power of individuals as they enact their own beliefs and values. Despite the brutal repression unleashed on 9 August 2020, the protests continued nearly unabated in an overwhelmingly non-violent manner for months.<sup>10</sup> This extreme polarity of militant support for authoritarianism, on the one hand, and the non-violent surge for freedom and a new national identity, on the other, is indelibly portrayed in *Insulted. Belarus*, making it a profound story not solely confined to one country's plight but emblematic of endeavours to divert the road to unfreedom globally. This article attempts to document, from the perspective of a participant in the Worldwide Readings Project, the significance of the play itself and its ability to express the growing concerns and struggles against authoritarianism around the world. In so doing, it aims to address questions about the role of the theatre in times of political crisis as well as about the interplay between protest, performance, and national identity.

### From the Street to the Page to the Screen

The 2020 protests in Belarus were an outpouring of decades of discontent. Since its independence from the Soviet Union and its first general election in 1994, the country has had only one president, Aliaksandar Lukashenka. Despite formal elections being held regularly, Belarus has operated as a dictatorship since the late 1990s. Lukashenka has rigged elections on numerous occasions and has made it clear that he expects his youngest son, Nikolai, to be named his successor.<sup>11</sup>

Nearly every election has seen coordinated opposition and subsequent protests, all of which Kureichyk has attended and been

involved in since he was a teenager. The 2020 protests, however, had very different characteristics from previous events within the country, and indeed to similar ones that have happened in Belarus's neighbours – Ukraine, Poland, or Romania. Some of these characteristics will be discussed in the analysis below, but an essential one that informed Kureichyk's writing of the play was the profound sense of equality that underlined the protests for the first time in his experience.

Although Lukashenka's politics of eternity relied upon what Natalia Leshchenko has called 'Belarusian egalitarian nationalism', a Soviet-style paternal welfare system that purported the equality of all citizens, the country has been growing increasingly fractured for over a decade.<sup>12</sup> A series of economic crises alongside a growing IT workforce created a divide commonly referred to as 'the old and new Belarus'.<sup>13</sup> However, in August 2020, it appeared that Belarusians from all strata of society were outraged and, indeed, insulted by Lukashenka's destruction of 'social contracts', his utter dismissal of the novel coronavirus to the detriment of the country's health, and his belittling and dehumanizing language which led to the most horrific use of force against peaceful protesters to date in the country, and 'the most severe repression anywhere in Europe in forty years'.<sup>14</sup>

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's campaign, on the other hand, brought what Kureichyk has called 'absolutely new feelings to Belarusian politics . . . a kind of humanity [that] showed that people are important'.<sup>15</sup> As non-professional politicians, the leaders of Tsikhanouskaya's campaign were representative of a new egalitarianism that moved beyond the notion of Two Belarus: Maryia Kalesnikava is a musician, Veranika Tsapkala is an IT manager, and Tsikhanouskaya herself is a teacher and housewife. They crossed social strata and, according to Kureichyk, spoke about 'people all the time, about what they need really'.<sup>16</sup>

This focus on the people and the concomitant change it produced among the protesters themselves translated into what sociologist Mischa Gabowitsch terms the 'horizontal spatial structure of the Belarusian protests'.<sup>17</sup> This horizontality informs Kureichyk's play

and is, in fact, its underlying dramaturgical structure. *Insulted. Belarus* is essentially a seventy-minute composition of monologues by characters directly taken from the contemporary Belarusian situation. While they are given archetypal names such as Oldster, Youth, Novice, Cheerful, Raptor, Corpse, and Mentor, the leading figures of the Belarusian political confrontation are portrayed: Lukashenka and his son, Tsikhanouskaya and Kalesnikava, as well as representative figures of the protests, including an OMON officer.<sup>18</sup> Direct or verbatim speech is incorporated, as are many events such as the death of protester Aliaksandar Taraikovsky or the leaked YouTube audio of a voting poll station leader clearly dictating what the fraudulent counts will be.<sup>19</sup>

While Kureichyk is undeniably anti-Lukashenka, the structure of the play gives voice to a range of social positions, while the events and lives of the characters begin to overlap and merge in ways that represent not only the accelerated and intense lived experience of a country on the edge of revolution, but also culminate in what Gabowitsch has highlighted as a 'new subjectivity'. The latter had emerged from the protests and is a 'pluralist civic identity that has come to supplant the narrower ethnocultural subjectivity of the earlier Belarusian opposition'.<sup>20</sup> Freedman has often stated that, after watching multiple readings of *Insulted. Belarus*, it became clear to him that Kureichyk had written what will be considered a new national play that perfectly and succinctly captured the drama of the new Belarusian subjectivity being born.

As noted, this subjectivity grew out of the horizontality of the protests. Yet that 'spatial structure' was created in large part by digital technology. The role that digital technology, together with the global Covid-19 pandemic, played in the move from protest to play-text to the Worldwide Readings Project cannot be underestimated. Even before the massive street protests, culture workers in Belarus had already begun a #cultprotest online and, once the election protests began in earnest, it is well documented how the Telegram channel Nexta (pronounced *nekhta* and meaning 'somebody') became the primary means of

coordinating protests and civic action.<sup>21</sup> In the hope of disrupting this coordination, Lukashenka attempted to shut down the internet in the country, essentially blocking much of it for a few days. Telegram was one of the only apps capable of getting through the blockade. Kureichyk's text incorporates the internet blockade, while the character Youth references Telegram and Nexta.

The character of Youth is a product of digital technology and represents the tension inherent in the 'new Belarus' feature of the Two Belarus theory. Although the dictator's son, he spends the bulk of his time playing online video games. While his father's entire ideology is based on a reconfiguration of the Soviet Union into a revised politics of eternity that serves him and his family, Youth does not have any respect or nostalgia for the Soviet Union. Unable to make the leap into the new egalitarian Belarusian subjectivity emerging around him, Youth cares more about the internet being blocked than the violence outside his door. Yet, eventually persuaded by his father, he takes up arms against the protesters. While this is clearly rooted in the historical events, it is also a comment on the ways in which Belarus struggles to move beyond its history and identity as a country of violence, trapped by its existing political teleology.<sup>22</sup>

Digital technology was also essential to the 'horizontal spatial structure' of the Worldwide Readings Project. As mentioned, Freedman initiated the Project via Facebook Messenger but, more significantly, the rise of Zoom and Facebook Live as 'venues' for performance due to the pandemic's global stay-at-home orders allowed the rapid self-organization of the Project. It has been noted how Lukashenka's wilful denial of the pandemic was disastrous for his approval ratings, and his obfuscation of the coronavirus in Belarus is mentioned in the text itself: the pandemic's importance for the impact of the Worldwide Readings project cannot be overstated. Freedman has often referred to Covid-19 as one of the elements in the 'perfect storm' of the Worldwide Readings Project's momentum and reach.<sup>23</sup> Thousands of theatre artists who were unable to work in person were hungry for material that could translate easily to these platforms, and while

Kureichyk did not conceive the play for these platforms, its format – essentially one of monologues delivered to the audience – was perfectly suited to them.

Nevertheless, the 'perfect storm' has not yet capsized Lukashenka. It may, therefore, be useful to consider current coalition-thinking around protest movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter for another metaphor for Covid-19: the pandemic might better be perceived as an amplifier. This was clearly an aim of Kureichyk's when he contacted Freedman on 9 September; through digital platforms the Project has reflected a sense of solidarity back to the people of Belarus, at the same time making many more people aware of the situation in the country. But was the Worldwide Readings Project simply an amplifier of the situation in Belarus, or did it translate to local contexts and act as a protest of those specific contexts in its own right?

### **The Power of Symbols in a Global Protest Imaginary**

Cultural historian Simon Lewis has remarked that 'protest cultures are inherently border-crossing phenomena, with borrowing, adaptation, and translation playing crucial roles'.<sup>24</sup> Songs, flags, posters, and protest tactics are all integral components of any sustained protest movements that are often such 'border-crossing phenomena'. 'At the same time,' according to Lewis, 'local agency and rootedness in national tradition are vital to widespread mobilization through shared affect'.<sup>25</sup> For the protest culture to have an impact on views on national identity, or indeed to evolve into a new subjectivity, then the 'rootedness' of that culture in a local or national tradition is essential. Similarly, a work of theatre can often count among 'border-crossing phenomena', but it loses its efficacy if it is not rooted in the collective traditions of the performers and audiences. If the Worldwide Readings Project is to be seen as an act of protest, then the question of how universal or local an individual reading of *Insulted. Belarus* actually was may help illuminate the efficacy of the text itself, as well as facilitate understanding of how the symbols of a specific protest resonate



and evolve into what I am calling a global protest imaginary.

For the many translators and participants interviewed in the Worldwide Readings Project, there was a palpable sense that Kureichyk had captured the raw and visceral intensity of the protests and channelled the emotions that underpin the country's new subjectivity into a targeted message of hope and love.<sup>26</sup> The translators, not surprisingly, saw their job as one of fidelity to the source, and attempted to remain as close to Kureichyk's original as possible, rather than make any cultural or contextual adaptations.

This choice of fidelity was mirrored in the majority of readings as well. Rather than set the reading in another country or context, or incorporate images, symbols, or characteristics of political figures from 'home countries' – for example, making Oldster an obese, orange-haired, golf-club-toting character – the readings tended to remain as Belarus-specific as possible. In speaking with a range of Project participants, two reasons for such fidelity were evident: one was the sense that the events in the play were immediate, were happening to people now, and should not be adapted to other contexts because the Project

was in its most basic but profound sense an act of adding your name to the ledger of global support.<sup>27</sup> For some participants, there was a sense that any overt translation of the circumstances to other contexts entered the terrain of appropriation (in both the negative connotation of the word and the sense of veering towards a new entity, as theorized by Julie Sanders in her book *Adaptation and Appropriation*).<sup>28</sup> In other words, while there may be similarities in the play-text to the multiple relevant issues in the United States of America, or the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, for instance, Kureichyk's play was written from lived experience about people undergoing specific atrocities that required urgent global awareness. Any adaptations risked diluting the clarity of that endeavour.

The second reason for safeguarding strict fidelity was the fact that the play was so artistically well conceived that most participants believed unaltered presentation provided the requisite distance for an audience to make connections to their own situation. Such connection could bring about greater understanding of local conditions and possibly even stimulate new thought and action for them. In the words of William Wong, the director



Figure 1. Zoom performance by Blank Space Studio, Hong Kong. Screenshot courtesy of John Freedman.

and organizer of multiple readings in Hong Kong (Figure 1):

We [set the play in Belarus] because firstly we hope to work around the National Security Law. Secondly, we have experienced something even more violent and absurd in Hong Kong and we are directly facing the mighty Chinese Communist Party, and we don't even have the military power and sovereign [status] to '[rely] on'. Therefore, setting the play in Hong Kong wouldn't be appropriate for this script. And I think setting the play in Belarus can actually open up more discussions and imaginations, rather than just making the whole thing self-pitying.<sup>29</sup>

This indication that retaining the play's setting in Belarus opens up a sense of global solidarity for the performers and audience in Hong Kong is an important one – a view also mirrored in the Belarusian protest strategies. As Nelly Bekus points out, Belarusians consciously adopted the singing of songs that aimed to unite and strengthen a free and independent national identity within public spaces such as metros and shopping malls from previous Hong Kong protests.<sup>30</sup>

There were of course moments in many productions where references to non-Belarusian events or people were requisite artistic choices. These included images of relevant paintings or buildings, videos of past authoritarians, or specific music, but they were used 'to pull out something fundamental to each character', as Robert Olinger, director of Studio Six (USA), has highlighted.<sup>31</sup>

Yet these additions were also there to help underscore the universal dramas contained within Kureichyk's text: the individual against the state; the collective efficacy of protest; the horrors of military aggression; and the necessity of, and fight for, the truth. Oksana Mysina's film is especially notable for bringing out the mythic quality of the play through layering external shots of both the natural beauty and ancient historical sites of Crete (where she is based) on to the solitary footage of actors (often shot on smartphones in Russia or Spain). In doing so, Mysina not only understands the way in which Kureichyk tapped into archetypal ideas of human experience, power, and freedom, but also how he aimed to merge the mythic with personal confession. This was a type of protest that has

historical antecedents in the Soviet theatre's valorization of 'honesty', 'sincerity', and 'confession' as a means to speak back to authoritarianism.<sup>32</sup>

Other tactics to forefront the universal themes or wider correlations contained in *Insulted. Belarus* embraced minor additions or adjustments to the text. For instance, in my own company's reading, the actor-director interrupts the first monologue to remind the actors and audience that the play was about both Belarus *and* the threat of authoritarianism in every country. We added this moment in part because we wanted our audience not to feel that this was simply a performance about events happening somewhere else and therefore be removed from them (particularly given our location in South West England, and the insular nationalism fuelling recent policies and conversations around Europe and sovereignty). Additionally, we wanted to reduce the feeling that we were speaking for the Belarusian people, given our very limited knowledge of the contemporary and historical situations at issue. Our insertion of this extra moment was, then, an attempt to second-guess audience reaction, as well as anticipate the feeling of actor unpreparedness with its concomitant doubts about the right of performers to speak for living people.

The Boston-based company Arlekin Players chose a very different tactic to the question of 'pretence' by aiming for extreme locality. Arlekin presented the very first reading (in Russian) of the Project on 17 September, but continued to mount new readings throughout the month in both English and Russian. For their 18 October reading, director Igor Golyak felt the need to push against the appropriateness of theatre to 'perform [events] being uncovered right now, with real people dying'; 'can we pretend to be them?' he asked.<sup>33</sup> Golyak asked Kureichyk to connect him with a Belarusian actor. Ales Malchanau performed the character of Corpse from his apartment in Minsk at 3.00 a.m. with the Belarusian white-red-white flag draped behind, and at times over, him (Figure 2).

Lesson four of Snyder's *On Tyranny* reminds us that the 'symbols of today enable



**Figure 2.** Ales Malchanau in the Arlekin Players Reading. Screenshot courtesy of Bryan Brown.

the reality of tomorrow'.<sup>34</sup> While Snyder is highlighting our responsibility to remove or speak out against symbols of hate and tyranny such as the Nazi swastika, it is equally important to remember that the promulgation of positive symbols enables a positive future. For Belarus, the question of subjectivity and nationality is intricately connected to the symbolic representation contained in the country's flag. In 1995, Lukashenka introduced a new national flag for Belarus that was a very minor modification of the previous Soviet-era heraldry. The white-red-white flag in opposition has been a symbol of independent Belarus for over a century, when it was first created in 1918 to represent a modern, free Belarus – a country that had never really existed before.<sup>35</sup>

'To be born Belarusian is to be born into invisibility'; or so Belarus-born Jenya Mironava, organizer of a reading by a group of graduate students from Harvard's Slavic Department, paraphrased Belarusian poet Valzhyna Mort during our conversation.<sup>36</sup> The truth underlying this claim is represented

in the lack of independent democratic statehood for the country, as well as the devastation wrought upon it by the Second World War: 'By the end of the war, half the population of Belarus had been either killed or moved. This cannot be said of any other European country.'<sup>37</sup> But symbols endure and often aid the invisible in becoming visible.

The protests of 2020 built on previous symbols from within the Belarusian cultural and sociopolitical landscape, but did so in a way that organically grew out of what Belarusian sociologist Nelly Bekus has highlighted as the protest imaginaries: 'the cultural grammar of protest that drives and sustains the protest [and] has been formed during the protest itself through the creative adaptation and reappropriation of ideas, values, and frames of understanding deriving from both the official and oppositional ideologies.'<sup>38</sup> For instance, as part of the new egalitarian Belarus that Kur-eichyk experienced in the first few weeks of August, the white-red-white flag moved beyond its status within previous oppositional ideologies and even beyond being a symbol of anti-Lukashenka sentiment. Through the protest imaginary, the white-red-white flag became a symbol for the new subjectivity of a civic and pluralistic Belarus.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, the flag has become a global symbol primarily because the connotations of white as pure or innocent, and red as blood, anger, and violence, lend themselves exceptionally well to a peaceful protest movement largely associated with women being violently suppressed by a militia comprised of masked men. While these resonances are embedded in Kureichyk's text in various ways – most strikingly through the character of the eighteen-year-old Cheerful, who realizes by the end of the play that her white dress has been covered in the blood of Corpse – the Worldwide Readings Project used the white-red-white flag to represent solidarity *and* the more universal fight for freedom through peaceful means (Figure 3).

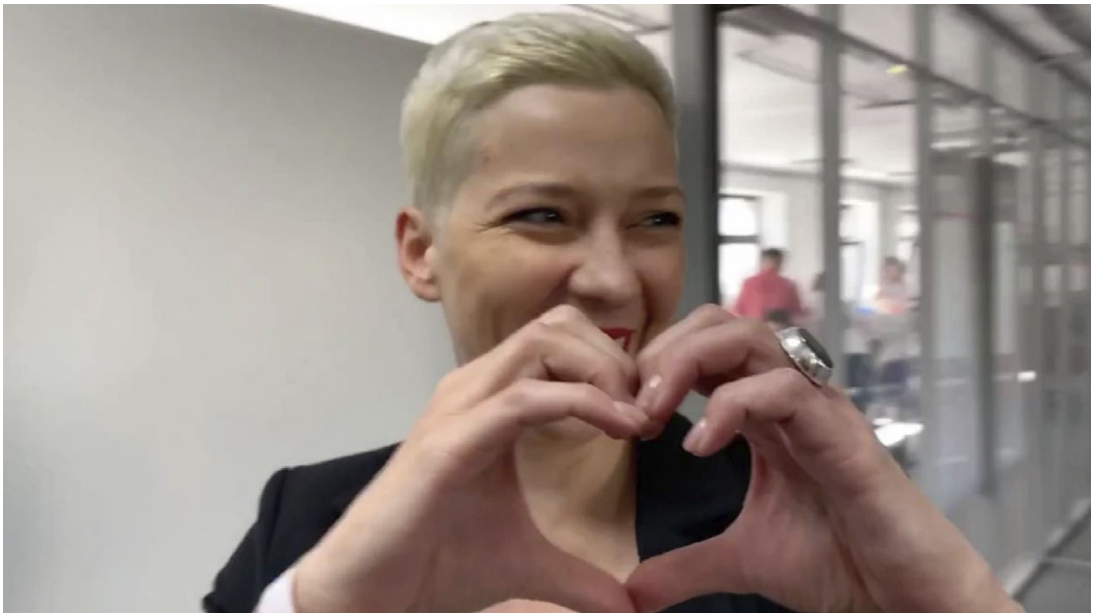
In this, the flag mingles with another powerful symbol which had appeared during the election campaign and subsequent protests. By no means unique to her, Maryia Kalesnikava has, however, made the hand-heart



**Figure 3.** Romanian poster created by Benedek Levente. Courtesy of Benedek Levente.

gesture a new symbol for the egalitarian Belarus, for a politics based on the strength of love in the face of overwhelming masculine aggression. Again, Kureichyk incorporates this gesture into the text when Cheerful sends it to Corpse as he is dying. Many of the readings elevated this gesture through a variety of means, including multiple uses throughout, placing it on posters and similarly prominent sites. By doing so, the hand-heart gesture further solidified the politics of love that the Belarusian people began to rally behind as a potential new global protest imaginary against authoritarianism everywhere (Figure 4).

Another symbol that plays a central role in the Belarus protests and Kureichyk's text, and is a forerunner for the flag and the hand-heart as border-crossing symbols of a global protest imaginary, is the song 'Mury' ('Walls'). The song is an adaptation of 'L'Estaca' ('The Stake'), written in 1968 by Catalan musician Luis Llach as a protest song against Franco's dictatorship. It subsequently became a symbol of the fight for freedom in multiple countries



**Figure 4.** Maryia Kalesnikava and her hand-heart, from *Insulted. Belarus(sia)*, a film by Oksana Mysina. Courtesy of Oksana Mysina.

and contexts. Russian and Belarusian poets and musicians have created various versions of 'Mury' over the last twenty years. It was often performed and played during the 2010 Belarus protests, and in May 2020 Siarhei Tsihkanouski (Sviatlana's husband and leading oppositional candidate before his arrest) called on his vlog audience to learn it. It soon became hugely popular and 'was played at the campaign rallies of his wife . . . as well as at mass protests in the aftermath of the rigged election on August 9'.<sup>40</sup>

Kureichyk uses the song as a device to build dramatic tension in the play, as well as empathy for the character of Corpse, who repeatedly sings/recites the lyrics as he is beaten to death by the OMON. In the English version, Freedman translates the repeated stanza, and provides a link to the Belarusian song for production use. However, as part of the 'horizontal spatial structure' of the Worldwide Readings Project that mirrors the horizontal spirit of the protests, Lev and Olga Frayman of Theatre Novi Most (Minneapolis) created an English adaptation of the song that Freedman adds at the end of the production script.<sup>41</sup>

The song is an essential component of the protests and the play-text, and is therefore a node of translation in multiple productions. In other words, each specific reading has to make a choice about how best to assimilate this semantic phrase. Mysina's film, for example, begins and ends with Corpse singing the Russian version of 'Mury', which further brings together the two struggles, Belarus and Russia, in this production.

Many other productions learned a version of the Belarusian song. In English-language productions, there were also those who made a choice to layer the text on to a melody that sounded 'protest-like'. Still others chose to replace the song with something more context-specific. In our reading, for instance, the English actor portraying Corpse, who, in the play-text, is a diehard football fan, proposed to sing the American spiritual and Civil Rights protest song 'We Shall Not Be Moved' because it has been adopted and adapted by multiple English football clubs as an anthem. This was a novel replacement that rooted the

reading in English sensibilities and furthered semantic connections between myself and my partner as American citizens, and the ways we felt the reading was a small act of protest against Brexit, Trump, and the ongoing horrors of his administration, including the potential decimation of the legacies of John Lewis and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who died the day before our reading.

One of the reasons *Insulted. Belarus* has creatively inspired so many global theatre-makers is its distillation of the tension between the ideological legacies of equality and supremacy. Protest brings this tension at the core of our nation states to the surface. From his own lived experience within the protests, Kureichyk has translated the emotions and language of each side of the protest into the desire for stability and the necessity of love – and this has resonated richly with the various readings worldwide.

Right at the beginning of the play the character of Oldster proposes the workhorse as the epitome of a country in thrall to 'stability': 'We'd find common ground. A few oats, a few whacks, and she'd work for me and love me.'<sup>42</sup> Later, Novice speaks about her husband's podcast 'A Country for Life'. Those interviewed for the podcast speak about 'their difficult lives, and shared dreams about life in a free, prosperous country' and are in turn jailed for doing so.<sup>43</sup> Novice cradles and enlarges that dream of freedom into a vision of life as interconnectivity: 'As a wife and mother, I understand that it's one for all and all for one in the family circle. I want it to be like that in our country too.'<sup>44</sup> Thus, 'A Country called Horse' and 'A Country for Life' become opposing slogans that highlight another dimension of the protest imaginary: the conflict between the patriarchy and female agency.

Despite Tsihkanouskaya's campaign being a coalition of three women, and the protests often portrayed in the media as led by women, there have been multiple critiques of the feminist underpinning of the movement in Belarus as continuing to reinforce heteropatriarchal values.<sup>45</sup> 'Such an interpretation,' according to Natallia Paulovich, 'is reinforced by visual images of

women protesting in white clothes with flowers, singing lullabies, sometimes even barefoot, embracing the representatives of the special military forces and giving them flowers. As a result, innocence, whiteness, and even childishness became the main symbols of the protests.<sup>46</sup> However, just as in Kureichyk's text, there is a wellspring of strength and intelligent strategy below this neo-hippie surface. Love, as the Civil Rights struggle in the USA has shown time and again, is not a weakness or childish embrace of the oppressor, but rather the courage to claim human dignity and to protect one's self and community. Echoing Novice's statement cited above, Paulovich asserts:

Belarusian women who take part in protests are convinced that their biological role – the ability to bear children and be a mother – positions them differently in society and enables them to protect a sphere that is reserved for them with all its implied resources. They are aware that this strategy is essential for the 'common good', which goes beyond caring for their families and stretches to encompass society at large.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, Kureichyk's play portrays the strength of the women characters through their love for family and fellow citizens. Cheerful's innocence, yet determined sense of justice in the face of brutality, Novice's fundamental belief in the resilience and goodness in people that fuels her question 'What are you willing to do for love?', and Mentor's eventual turn on the regime out of desperation for her daughter, all reinforce the sense of agency derived from the biological sphere retained in Belarusian society. As Paulovich argues, these 'agentic acts appear as . . . one of many modalities of agency in which the fact of being subjected to established gendered norms does not eliminate the possibility of transgressing them'.<sup>48</sup>

The Worldwide Readings Project has found some remarkable ways to transgress and adapt the Belarusian delineation of gender roles without losing the essential spirit of love that pervades both protest and play-text. For instance, some readings have cast a female actress as Oldster, giving new meaning to the dictatorial and violent hold on power.

Swedish theatre and screen star Lena Endre gave a particularly searing and powerful performance of the dictator in a reading that expertly played with gender roles by also casting female actor Hulda Lind Jóhannsdóttir as Youth and male actor Hannes Meidal as Mentor. But, to date, the only all-female cast has been a reading done by University of Exeter students, some of whom were audience for, and 'protesters' at, my company's reading, after which they felt a strong need to do an all-female version. This was a group of ten under-twenty-five activist theatre-makers, some of whom identify as queer, while others have significant experience protesting against environmental and climate crises, including abuse from the bailiff/police forces.

Similar to the Belarusian people, the violent misogyny of the Lukashenka regime became a tipping point for these women whose outrage found a channel in Kureichyk's text and a supporting network in the Worldwide Readings Project. Although all rehearsals were done online, the live reading was held in person (although presented online) the day before the second lockdown order came into effect in the UK. The co-directors Poppy Franziska and Sophia Trewick situated the actors in a large circle, each with their own laptop, and with the technical director in the middle. This circle was, according to Trewick, representative of the 'deep, deep need to be with other women who were creative and also angry, and share it, just share that space together'.<sup>49</sup> The directors spent a lot of time creating that space to hold and navigate the personal trauma some of the actors had experienced, in order for the performance of the text to be a cathartic rather than triggering experience (Figure 5).

Of course, the trauma of male violence on women's bodies is contained in another, perhaps unintentional symbol, in the current global protest imaginary: that of the modern-day stormtrooper, the unidentifiable, often black-balaclava-wearing, special forces. In Kureichyk's text the character of Raptor embodies this figure. A raptor is of course a bird of prey; it hunts and seizes or takes by force what it wants. Raptor in Kureichyk's text is a Ukrainian mercenary, who is willing to work



**Figure 5.** Zoom performance by students from the University of Exeter. Screenshot courtesy of Bryan Brown.

for any regime or corporation that pays well, feeds his brutal and sadistic desires, and his essential sense of self-preservation.

But Raptor as a symbol has manifested in various physical incarnations globally over the last few years. Multiple US participants saw Raptor in the police and special forces deployed against the Black Lives Matter protests, particularly the situation in Portland, Oregon, where unidentified federal officers used unmarked vans to abduct protesters.<sup>50</sup> For Jenya Mironava, Raptor did not feel like some made-up character. The United States of America reminded her of home (Belarus). She found that her newsfeeds were matching up, and she did not like it.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, William Wong felt that ‘the role of Raptor is just the same as the Hong Kong Police during the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill Protest’, and there was no ‘need to translate anything on to the play [because] the play is the reality in Hong Kong [extending to the fact that] the special unit which the HK Police deployed was named “Squad Raptor”’.<sup>52</sup>

Without diluting the specific struggles of Belarus, there is a global protest imaginary operating today as the pandemic combines with a post-truth ideology to reinforce authoritarian power, and people and artists around the world struggle to find modes of resistance. *Insulted. Belarus* offers, in the words

of Sophia Trewick, ‘a channel’ for all the horror that might normally numb or overwhelm individuals to their own suffering, as well as the suffering of those around them.<sup>53</sup> During a panel discussion for the North American theatre internet channel HowlRound, Kureichyk stated:

When you struggle alone, you actually don’t have hope. If you feel you are in the kind of network of artistic people in the world, it gives you a different kind of strength in this situation. It gives you hope. So, I think it’s very important to show solidarity with artistic people all over the world.<sup>54</sup>

### Solidarity or Protest?

When interviewing participants in the World-wide Readings Project, I was struck by the many different interpretations of the word ‘protest’. Some of this is naturally inherent in linguistic translation. All interviews and surveys were conducted in English, leaving wide semantic (mis)interpretation to take place. But it is also dependent, as with all semantics, on context and personal interpretation.

As a case in point: the majority of participants from former Eastern bloc countries, particularly but not exclusively Romania, conceived of protest as violence. They were therefore adamant that their participation was an act of solidarity. The connotation that protest

is violence is embedded in a particular understanding of revolution, which equates protest with revolution, and revolution with the violent overthrow of the former regime. An essential factor here is that not every participating country in the Worldwide Readings Project upholds the right to protest. A number of other contributing features are worth considering. As noted, the Belarus protests were markedly different from those in Ukraine in 2014. There was no Maidan. In fact, the defining aspect of love and egalitarianism of the new Belarusian subjectivity greatly informed the kinds of symbols the protest imaginary implemented in the hope of building a future that moved beyond the country's violent past.

Bekus observes: 'One of the recurring slogans appearing at the protests, namely "We Belarusians are peaceful people"', reveals a strong reluctance in Belarus to accept violence, thereby largely determining the repertoire of the means of protest employed.<sup>55</sup> As demonstrated previously, the Worldwide Readings often mirrored the protests, and the participants interviewed may have resisted protest as a label for their action because they did not personally want to be associated with violence, because their theatrical production is not an act of violence, or because they felt so aligned with the Belarusian protesters that they did not want violence associated with their action, and thus employed a means of protest outside the traditionally conceived ones that lead to violence.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, some participants adamantly felt that their participation in the Project was an act of protest. 'While there was,' in the words of Joseph Lavy of Akropolis Performance Lab (Seattle), 'undoubtedly an element of preaching to the choir in the performance act itself . . . the cumulative effect of hundreds of theatres and artists around the world making an unequivocal statement by uniting in this project certainly amplifies these readings/performances into an act of protest.'<sup>56</sup> First and foremost, this protest was against Lukashenka, but some participants saw this protest extending beyond Lukashenka and directly against their local context and/or against the growing authoritarianism in the world.

For Robert Olinger, 'What is happening in Belarus is no different than what we see happening in the United States – just our infection has not yet overcome our organism.'<sup>57</sup> If we conceive of the situation in Belarus as a shared malady ready to infect, then we might usefully turn again to Timothy Snyder and his renewal of the eighteenth-century commingling of individual and body-politic health:

Truth is like health: we miss it when it fades. [Similarly, we] cannot be free without health, and we cannot be healthy without knowledge. [And here is a] paradox of liberty: we cannot be ourselves without help; we cannot thrive in solitude without the solidarity of others. We can only balance solitude with solidarity when we share a factual world that enables us to see the larger meaning of our actions.<sup>58</sup>

The solitude of being in a pandemic and the rage of being under threat of tyranny (real, remembered, or projected) became the galvanizing force for solidarity in the Worldwide Readings Project. The digital technology allowed for that solidarity to light up like signal fires.

And yet, when political situations erupt into violence, when human beings are compelled to put their bodies and lives in front of armed militias, those outside that situation, those living 'luxuriously elsewhere', as Olinger puts it, question even the very nature of solidarity, of 'the larger meaning of their actions'.<sup>59</sup> As German director Andreas Merz-Raykov pondered: 'It is not our fight. How can we be there? How can we be *really* there? Is it not just another project that we did now? How can it have consequences?'<sup>60</sup>

'True solidarity', as head of the artistic bureau and dramaturg of Het Nationale Theater (Dutch National Theatre) Remco van Rijn has eloquently phrased it,

means that you're willing to pay some personal price for the good of the group you're [creating solidarity] with. If you're not willing to really invest something of yourself – be it money, time, social status, or anything – is it true solidarity? And I think you should *feel* that you're paying a price: just clicking a 'like' button is merely a perversion of solidarity. So, in this case, I feel hesitant thinking about 'solidarity' with the people of Belarus: did I



really invest that much? Could we – should we – have done more, as a theatre company and as individuals? . . . Was it enough? Can it ever be enough in the face of the horrendous stories we heard in the play and on the news?<sup>61</sup>

Echoing this, Dutch and Flemish actress Sieste Remmers has stated:

I feel I – probably wrongly – associate an act of protest (just as solidarity) with some sort of sacrifice. That’s why I think it’s hard to see my participation as that, since it was and is such a gift, a privilege to have even read the text, let alone be a tiny part in the worldwide spreading of the text.<sup>62</sup>

That sense of a gift being given to the participants by Kureichyk’s text is echoed in many of the conversations and surveys, and it is sympathetic with the foundations of solidarity. For, as Snyder reminds us, solidarity starts with empathy. As Silvia Ghilas, Literary Advisor at the National Theatre in Iasi in Romania, has termed their participation: ‘I would rather [than a protest] call it a manifestation of our sadness and sympathy for the innocent people who suffer for the liberty of their words, feelings and actions.’<sup>63</sup> Similarly, for Exeter student Poppy Franziska, solidarity is simply ‘care’.<sup>64</sup> ‘And solidarity,’ continues Hong Kong director William Wong, ‘under great pressure or a seemingly hopeless situation, is even more power. It’s just like the character in Greek tragedies fighting against his fate. But this time, with solidarity, we are fighting together, and for each other.’<sup>65</sup> Or, as translator and organizer of the Romanian marathon of sixteen readings in sixteen days, Raluca Radulescu, has said, ‘It’s important. All the small gestures are really important. I was thinking I will do something small. It’s just theatre, I don’t change the world with theatre. But it’s important to do it.’<sup>66</sup>

Whether solidarity or protest, the fact remains that the Worldwide Readings Project has become a global movement with a two-pronged aim: to stand up and say no to the violent repression of the Belarusian people; and to bring more critical awareness to local situations of encroaching authoritarianism, loss of democratic and civil rights, the violent legacies of colonialism, racism, misogyny, and

the ongoing effects of environmental devastation. For Freedman, there is no denying that the project has affected its participants and audiences. He has received countless emails stating how the project has gripped people’s attentions and changed the way they see their immediate surroundings; and has even changed their lives. But, for all that, according to Freedman, ‘it would have been enough to see the impassioned readings done in [so many countries] to know that this play hit its mark. A real bullseye, it made people hurt, it made them feel, it roused them from sleep.’<sup>67</sup>

### Awaking to Action

The term ‘woke’ is overused and overtly politicized today. However, multiple participants in the Worldwide Readings Project spoke of their involvement as a chance to be part of a larger wake-up call to the growing threat of authoritarianism and violence. In the framework of Snyder’s project, the act of waking up is a coming to the realization that the teleology of the politics of inevitability ‘is a self-induced intellectual coma’, a life un-lived, bound and unfree; while the politics of eternity is a willed nostalgia, a trance of privileged insularity.<sup>68</sup> Waking up to history means waking up to moments. Snyder: ‘To understand one moment is to see the possibility of being the co-creator of another.’<sup>69</sup>

Through an understanding of the contemporary moment of Belarus, the necessities that brought a nation on to its streets, and the brutality of a subsidized mercenary force, participants and audiences of the Worldwide Readings Project alike are able to understand their own contemporary moment, which is a way towards understanding one’s own responsibility for individual actions, as well as those of one’s communities. Solidarity demands liberty – the right to *not* act if one so chooses – and liberty demands responsibility. As Snyder says, ‘History permits us to be responsible: not for everything, but for something.’<sup>70</sup>

If Snyder’s project is to bring history back to politics, the Worldwide Readings Project has similarly brought politics back to many

theatres. Remco van Rijn highlighted how 'the reading of the play was also a tiny spark to try and re-ignite a political flame in Dutch society, [and] personally, it has strengthened my belief that theatre is *always* a political statement, a form of protest.'<sup>71</sup> And for John Freedman,

the Worldwide Readings Project actually did change the way I think about protest and the world of art . . . I've always been very political and engaged, but I have never demanded it – or even wanted it – from my art. . . . I am beginning to see all that nonsense about 'I don't care what's going on around me, I just do my art' as what it is – cowardice and weakness. That doesn't mean every piece of work must be political, but, in my book, you'd better not hide in your art from the politics around you, or your art will be pale and weak, a house of cards that any wind will topple easily. This is actually a new place for me . . .<sup>72</sup>

Taken all together, this indicates that the Worldwide Readings Project, like the Belarusian protests themselves, may have 'given rise to a new subjectivity' for global theatre-makers, a subjectivity that might similarly be civic-focused and pluralistic.<sup>73</sup> But just as with early analysis of the protests, this analysis is too close to an emerging phenomenon to tell 'whether and how that new subjectivity might also affect everyday life';<sup>74</sup> whether it might 'spill over into new ways of organizing local communities, creating new solidarities that will express the new-found subjectivity on a practical level', or simply end as the cycle of protests ends and/or the regime change transpires.<sup>75</sup>

Despite whatever eventual outcome, the Worldwide Readings Project has already raised significant questions about the future of digital technology, theatre, and protest. Theatre, particularly institutional theatre, struggles to be 'of the moment', yet this Project has had at least eight national or state theatres from across Europe involved. Many of these productions brought attention and awareness of the situation in Belarus to national politicians.<sup>76</sup> The digital aspect also changed the nature of the readings not just through the more obvious medial translations, but because the audience was suddenly unknown, and the recording would be lasting – an obviously contentious area for future

protest work. As Robert Olinger has observed:

Typically, a production is done for an audience, and that audience is fairly well known. Here, the audience is completely unimportant; whether a single viewer watches matters little. This is terrible for 'theatre' but not bad at all for theatre done for protest (if we are using this word). What *Insulted* produced was a ledger of global support. Participation and unity was important, and it could happen rapidly. With only a small number of willing actors and a Zoom account, you could add yourself to this ledger. It also is not costless, it takes time and effort, so very different [from] a petition with signatures. I think this is what is incredibly appealing – it took work, but did not require any of the vestiges theatre typically requires – therefore it was an expression of support, care, connectedness, that correlated very closely to those of each individual artist participating. I suspect almost no actor/director/producer received any compensation for their participation, and this gives it power.<sup>77</sup>

A question that pervades both theatre and protest is that of live, embodied experience. Protest for many of the Project's participants is the physical body confronting resistance. How might new approaches to protest, or new forms of it, grow from this Project? One possible solution has begun to be conceived by John Freedman in a project called *Insulted. World*, where theatre-makers will be encouraged to write plays about their own local 'insulted' situations. Freedman will then organize and manage the Project's networks to develop readings and productions. And yet, as with the *Insulted. Belarus* Worldwide Readings Project, the wind blows and the sail takes the boat to sea. William Wong is already steering one such vessel, having contacted Freedman before he even had time to suggest his *Insulted. World* to anyone, saying he was working on new short plays about the dire situation in Hong Kong. As Wong wrote to me on 15 June 2021:

I have invited several playwrights and they are going to write their own fifteen-to-thirty-minute plays, on what we have experienced and what they have consolidated after the Protest and the enforcement of National Security Law. They are going to do this anonymously as it is quite dangerous to do it with our own names. Then I will have people to

translate it into English and try to have people outside Hong Kong to read them. And hopefully these will slowly 'invade' back into Hong Kong. This can be a new way of fighting against tyranny, in an artistic way. Apart from trying to gain international support and awareness, the other thing I wish this project can achieve is: to warn the people who are living in democratic countries to stay alert. Anything can change in their own countries in a split second if we give in to authoritative ideologies. Democracy is very fragile, we will have to give our best to protect it.

Sadly, such a change has already occurred since this communication. On 24 February 2022, Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, believing that the world would simply accept his authoritarian view of history with its blatant genocidal intentions. Within days, Freedman, Wong, myself, and a core of the Worldwide Readings Project were again in action, helping to generate a Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings project to raise much-needed funds for the people of Ukraine. This new 'horizontal space' is a larger and even more complex one, fifty-five days into the war, than the *Insulted. Belarus* Project was at the height of its activity. The number of available plays surpasses forty and the rationales for participation involve everything from supporting the crowdfunding of the Ukraine military to refugee support and educational activities around the various intersecting issues at play in this war; that is, climate emergency, systemic racism, imperialism, and post-colonial sensibilities, among others. The darkening road to unfreedom is being constructed in broad daylight. And it has sparked renewed discussion about the role of nationalism in a country's identity, one that Snyder again highlights as a potential pathway around 'undue optimism and undue pessimism', a way that is creative and capable of conceiving 'multiple better futures'.<sup>78</sup> Equally, there is a renewed sense of activism in theatres that previously saw their work as mainly 'artistic' or 'cultural'. Both theatre and protest can be tools for the creation and/or solidification of national identities, and they can be sources of the creativity capable of imagining the multiplicity needed for an as-yet-unknown sense of nationality and identity.

In conclusion, just as the 2020 Belarus protests created a new subjectivity from the act of protesting itself, not from a collective leader or new party ideology, the Worldwide Readings Project has no 'leader'. While Kureichyk obviously wrote the play and Freedman made the English translation, and both organized many readings and propelled the movement into many countries, the Project itself has more often than not snowballed on its own momentum. Through sharing of the script or watching of a reading, a new reading or event was born somewhere else. Reflecting on the power of the play and its attraction for so many theatre-makers, Guillermo Cienfuegos, director of the English-language premiere of the Project for Rogue Machine Theatre (Los Angeles), stated that 'This isn't a history lesson'.<sup>79</sup> Yet, as Timothy Snyder comments, 'History is and must be political thought, in the sense that it opens an aperture between inevitability and eternity, preventing us from drifting from the one to the other, helping us see the moment when we might make a difference.'<sup>80</sup> *Insulted. Belarus* and the Worldwide Readings Project have for many around the world become such an aperture.

## Notes and References

1. There are various and contesting accounts of the final election results, but it seems highly probable that Tsikhanouskaya won on the first round. For a comprehensive account, see Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), p. 284–6.
2. John Freedman, Facebook Messenger note to author, 9 September 2020.
3. The play was written in Russian and titled *Obizhennye. Belarus(siiia)* in order to highlight the interplay between the Soviet ideology of Belarussia (White Russia) and a new, free Belarus.
4. For convenience, I refer to all events as 'staged readings'. However, there have been full productions of the play, notably the world premiere on 1 October 2020 at Kulish Academic Musical and Drama Theatre in Kherson in Ukraine, as well as films and hybrid theatrical films. For a full list see <<https://www.insultedbelarus.com>>, accessed 16 July 2022.
5. Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (London: Bodley Head, 2018), p. 16.
6. Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (London: Bodley Head, 2017), p. 118.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
8. It could be argued that Belarus and the Soviet Union began the twentieth century within the framework

of a politics of inevitability, albeit of the inevitable progress of communism rather than liberal democracy. But, as the Soviet Union slid into totalitarianism, Belarus, like all member states, entered the teleology of eternity. Snyder's road to unfreedom is a warning to twenty-first-century liberal democracies, but takes its lessons as much from Hitler's Germany as Stalin's Soviet Union.

9. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, p. 35.
10. For an account in numbers of the swift brutality of the first month of protests, see Wilson, *Belarus*, p. 287.
11. For rigged elections, see Wilson, *Belarus*, p. x. For claims about succession, see Chris Monday, 'Family Rule as the Highest Stage of Communism', *Asian Survey*, LI, No. 5 (October 2011), p. 812–43 (p. 829).
12. Wilson, *Belarus*, p. 205.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 304.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 299.
15. Andrei Kureichyk, interview with author, 6 June 2021.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Mischa Gabowitsch, 'Belarusian Protest: Regimes of Engagement and Coordination', *Slavic Review*, LXXX, No. 1 (Spring 2021), p. 27–37 (p. 29).
18. OMON is the Special Forces arm of the Belarusian police; sometimes referred to as the riot police or militia. The OMON were joined by other tactically trained military and police forces from Belarus, as well as Russian-speaking mercenaries, in their violent repression of the protesters, including former members of Ukraine's Berkut special forces. See <<https://www.currenttime.tv/a/zhumalisty-ustanovili-lichnosti/31143159.html>>, accessed 5 July 2021.
19. See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30sn2RX1Cg&t=581s>>, accessed 5 July 2021.
20. Gabowitsch, 'Belarusian Protest', p. 27.
21. See <<https://cultprotest.me/>>, accessed 5 July 2021; and Simon Lewis, "'Tear Down These Prison Walls!' Verses of Defiance in the Belarusian Revolution", *Slavic Review*, LXXX, No. 1 (Spring 2021), p. 15–26 (p. 19–21). For Nexta, see Gabowitsch, 'Belarusian Protest', p. 7–8.
22. For a description of Lukashenka and his son taking up arms, see Wilson, *Belarus*, p. 292. Additionally, poet Valzhyna Mort speaks eloquently about the history of Belarus and violence. See <<https://poetrysociety.org.uk/valzhyna-mort/>> and <<https://globalvoices.org/2020/08/14/this-is-a-partisan-movement-of-a-partisan-nation-a-belarusian-poet-reflects-on-her-homelands-turmoil/>>, accessed 7 July 2021.
23. John Freedman and Oksana Mysina, "'Insulted. Belarus": From Play to Movement', IOTF: The International Online Theatre Festival 2021, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&fbclid=IwAR2shSooiJhDvtsucli6-HsO9phQ3lACnNK-lactubEQShSdGDAGPcCEo8&v=\\_KyZoZuYlY4&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&fbclid=IwAR2shSooiJhDvtsucli6-HsO9phQ3lACnNK-lactubEQShSdGDAGPcCEo8&v=_KyZoZuYlY4&feature=youtu.be)> (2021), accessed 2 July 2021 (at 18:22).
24. Lewis, "'Tear Down These Prison Walls!'", p. 16.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Initially I sent a seven-question survey to fifty-six key participants in the project whom Freedman and I identified. Twenty-one responses were received. I also interviewed another eight participants, including Kureichyk himself.
27. I am indebted to Robert Olinger of Studio Six (USA) for the metaphor of the Worldwide Readings Project as a 'ledger of global support'.

28. Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).
29. Author questionnaire, 15 June 2021.
30. Nelly Bekus, 'Echo of 1989? Protest Imaginaries and Identity Dilemmas in Belarus', *Slavic Review*, LXXX, No. 1 (Spring 2021), p. 4–14 (p. 6).
31. Author questionnaire, 4 June 2021.
32. See Elena Markova, *Off Nevsky Prospekt: St Petersburg's Theatre Studios in the 1980s and 1990s* (London: Routledge 1998); and Anatoly Smeliansky, *The Russian Theatre after Stalin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
33. HowlRound, 'Special Artists Talk: *Insulted Belarus (sia)*: The Play. The Documentary. The Movement', <<https://howlround.com/happenings/insulted-belarusia-andrei-kureichik>> (2020), accessed 5 July 2021 (at 32:01).
34. Snyder, *On Tyranny*, p. 32.
35. While the Belarus National Republic declared independence on 25 March 1918, 'it didn't lead to a Belarusian state' (Wilson, *Belarus*, p. 94). When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Belarus became independent by default, but Lukashenka had consolidated power by 1995.
36. Interview with author, 22 June 2021.
37. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Bodley Head, 2010), p. 251.
38. Bekus, 'Echo of 1989?', p. 7.
39. See *ibid.*; and Gabowitsch, 'Belarusian Protest'.
40. Lewis, "'Tear Down These Prison Walls!'", p. 15–16.
41. Freedman has published his translation of the play, but has a production script with additional notes and comments that he sends to anyone willing to do a reading.
42. Andrei Kureichyk, 'Insulted. Belarus', trans. John Freedman, *Plays International Magazine*, XXXV (2020), p. 33–44 (p. 33).
43. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
44. *Ibid.*
45. For but one example see <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/11/world/europe/in-belarus-women-led-the-protests-and-shattered-stereotypes.html>>, accessed 5 July 2021.
46. Natallia Paulovich, 'How Feminist is the Belarusian Revolution? Female Agency and Participation in the 2020 Post-Election Protests', *Slavic Review*, LXXX, No. 1 (Spring 2021), p. 38–44 (p. 41).
47. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
48. Kureichyk, 'Insulted. Belarus', p. 44; Paulovich, 'How Feminist is the Belarusian Revolution?', p. 44.
49. Interview with author, 11 June 2021.
50. There are accounts of this tactic happening in multiple cities in the USA against BLM protesters, but Portland captured the media and the nation's attention. For but one account, see <<https://www.npr.org/2020/07/17/892277592/federal-officers-use-unmarked-vehicles-to-grab-protesters-in-portland?t=1625918313400>>, accessed 5 July 2021.
51. Interview with author, 22 June 2021.
52. Author questionnaire, 15 June 2021. Additionally, the Special Tactical Squad is a subdivision of the Hong Kong Police known for its brutality. Formed in 2014 during the Umbrella Revolution, this elite squad is referred to colloquially as the 'raptors'. See Sealing Cheng, 'Feeding Hungry Ghosts: Grief, Gender, and Protest in Hong Kong', *Critical Asian Studies*, LIV, No. 2 (July 2022), p. 1–21.

53. Interview with author, 11 June 2021.
54. HowlRound, 'Special Artists Talk' (at 29:08).
55. Bekus, 'Echo of 1989?', p. 7.
56. Author questionnaire, 24 June 2021.
57. Author questionnaire, 4 June 2021.
58. Timothy Snyder, *Our Malady: Lessons in Liberty and Solidarity* (London: Bodley Head, 2020), p. 109.
59. Author questionnaire, 4 June 2021.
60. Interview with author, 8 June 2021.
61. Author questionnaire, 27 April 2021.
62. Author questionnaire, 30 May 2021.
63. Author questionnaire, 7 June 2021.
64. Interview with author, 11 June 2021.
65. Author questionnaire, 15 June 2021.
66. Interview with author, 12 June 2021.
67. Author questionnaire, 9 May 2021.
68. Snyder, *On Tyranny*, p. 119.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
71. Author questionnaire, 27 April 2021.
72. Author questionnaire, 9 May 2021.
73. Gabowitsch, 'Belarusian Protest', p. 36.
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*
76. For instance, the Dramaten reading was attended by the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde, representatives of the Ministry of Culture, and other high-level officials. The Exeter readings were made available to Ben Bradshaw MP, who in turn brought Kuriechyk and his play to the attention of the office of the Foreign Secretary, and that of the Minister for the European Neighbourhood and the Americas, Wendy Morton MP.
77. Author questionnaire, 4 June 2021.
78. Yuval Noah Harari and Timothy Snyder, 'The War in Ukraine and the Future of the World', YES (Yalta European Strategy), <<https://youtu.be/S9FDabcyPWk>> (2 March 2022), accessed 6 April 2022, (at 45:05).
79. Interview with author, 22 June 2021.
80. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, p. 12.