

Making Yara Arts Group's "Radio 477!" with Serhiy Zhadan

by Virlana Tkacz

NEW YORK – In November 2021, I was in Kharkiv, Ukraine, working on a new show for Yara Arts Group called "Radio 477!" with Serhiy Zhadan, my favorite Ukrainian writer who won four major international literary awards this year. Mr. Zhadan lives in Kharkiv and shares my passion for the Kharkiv avantgarde of the 1920s. Our show was inspired by a musical score I found a few years ago, which turned out to be the conductor's copy of the legendary jazz musical staged in Kharkiv in 1929 and thought to be lost during the Stalinist purges.

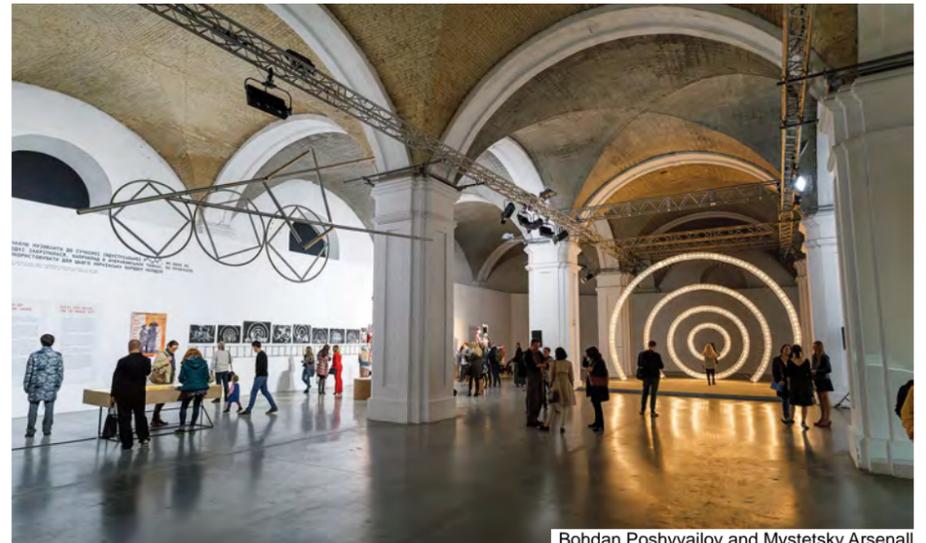
In 1929, the Berezil Theatre created "Hello, This Is Radio 477!," a jazz musical revue about Kharkiv. It had catchy songs, wild dances, a spectacular set and fabulous costumes that captivated its audiences but did not endear itself to the Soviet bosses and was soon pulled from the repertoire.

The conductor's score I found included almost 300 pages of music and almost no text, except for the lyrics to one song. Mr. Zhadan suggested we create a new piece about a company trying to create a new theater piece about Kharkiv, using the basic structure of the 1929 show suggested by the programs we found. We invited New Yorker Anthony Coleman, a legendary downtown pianist, to develop new music inspired by the original music composed for the show by Yuliy Meitus.

I am the artistic director of Yara Arts Group, a resident company of the world renown La MaMa Experimental Theatre in New York. We create original theatre pieces in rehearsals from fragments of poetry, texts, song and historical material from Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine. Our very first theater piece in 1990 was about Les Kurbas, the Ukrainian theater director who created the Berezil Theatre.

Since our founding, we have created over 40 theater pieces, 25 of which were based on material from Ukraine. I believe that culture is a dialogue with our contemporaries, and also with the art and artists from our past. We become a part of Ukrainian culture when we enter into an active dialogue with it. Yara makes masterpieces of Ukrainian culture available to our English-speaking audience by translating them and by setting them in a cultural context, so people unfamiliar with it can gain a deeper appreciation.

In 2018, Yara co-produced a series of museum exhibits about Les Kurbas in Ukraine, including "Kurbas in Kharkiv" at the Yermilov Center in Kharkiv. Our designers Waldemart Klyuzko and Yevhen Kopiov recreated the spectacular set Vadym Meller designed for the 1929 Berezil production of this jazz musical. This set became the center piece of our exhibit and the favorite selfie spot in town as our constant events about Mr. Kurbas and the 1920s avant-garde drew hundreds of viewers to Yermilov.



Bohdan Poshyvailov and Mystetsky Arsenal

Visitors gathered to view the "Kurbas: New Worlds" exhibit at the Mystetskyi Arsenal, Ukraine's premiere art venue in Kyiv. Over 20,000 viewers came to see the exhibition and associated events.

A few months later, we opened "Kurbas: New Worlds" at the Mystetskyi Arsenal, Ukraine's premiere venue in Kyiv. Over 20,000 viewers came to see our exhibition and events. Our events included a concert of music with Anthony Coleman conducting 18 young musicians from Kharkiv playing music from the Meitus score for the first time since 1929. People loved this performance, which was framed by the glorious lit arcs of light of the Meller set, and we decided to pursue this project as a theater piece.

lived. These included Messrs. Kurbas and Meller, as well as Maik Iohasen, the head writer on the show.

I shared my residency apartment with composer Anthony Coleman and designer Waldemart Klyuzko. Mr. Zhadan lived a few blocks from us. Every morning we walked to our rehearsal space in the Regional Center of Culture and Arts of Kharkiv, retracing the steps of the artists who originally created this piece. In the evening, we often stopped by the theater museum in the Shevchenko Theatre that in the 1920s was the Berezil. Mr. Coleman had a lecture at the Kotliarevsky Conservatory, which Mr. Meitus attended when he started working with Mr. Kurbas.

The pandemic put our plans on hold. But last November we held our first workshop in Kharkiv with seven local actors and six musicians. Thanks to the Kharkiv Literary Museum, I had a residency in the Slovo Building where many of the artists who created the original show in 1929

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Waldemart Klyuzko

Virlana Tkacz (left) speaks with actors during rehearsals for "Radio 477!" in Kharkiv.



Waldemart Klyuzko

Serhiy Zhadan is seen during a workshop for "Radio 477!" in Kharkiv.

Performance Spaces for the 21st Century and Yara Arts Group present:

RADIO 477!

Text & lyrics by Serhiy Zhadan
 inspired by a 1929 jazz musical from Kharkiv, Ukraine
 Music by Anthony Coleman,
 Project conceived and directed by Virlana Tkacz

Friday & Saturday
 August 19-20
 2022

PS21 "Open Air" Pavilion Theater
 2980 New York 66, Chatham, NY

Info: yaraartsgroup.net

Making Yara...

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We were inspired by the close physical presence of the past in Kharkiv, and also by the city's great energy and hope for the future. This is reflected in the first act of "Radio 477!," which we put together in Kharkiv last November. Following the structure of the 1929 show, we have scenes in Kharkiv near a poster announcing a new show, then in a brand-new department store, park and theater. We even have a scene with a spectacular theft, just like in the original. We called our show "Radio 477!" after the first radio station in Kharkiv. We wanted to examine our relationship to those times when everyone was busy dancing, but dark times were just around the corner. We didn't realize how true this would become for our show and times too.

We were scheduled to do a second workshop in the city in March, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine prevented this. A few days after the invasion, Yara organized a "Stand with Ukraine" event with Eugene Hutz and numerous downtown artists at the Ukrainian Museum in New York. Many such events followed.

Mr. Zhadan, who remained in Kharkiv organizing humanitarian aid in the city, urged us to continue work on our theater project. We had always planned to include Yara's diverse group of New Yorkers in our show. This spring we conducted our second workshop with them at La MaMa. Our spring workshop culminated in a performance at a festival dedicated to Vaclav Havel at the Bohemian National Hall in Manhattan.

A few days later, Mr. Zhadan posted the following on his Facebook page:

"I wrote the words, trying to imagine, what Maik Iohansen, the original writer of the libretto, could have wanted to say, and



The musical score for "Hello, This Is Radio 477!," which was written in 1929, was recently discovered and put on public display.

legendary jazz musician Anthony Coleman, worked with the notes of the father of Ukrainian jazz, Yuliy Meitus, giving them a contemporary sound.

"The result was an ironic and moving show about Kharkiv, portrayed as the capital of jazz and constructivism, a city of theaters and business, about love, desire and politics. There was a lot of singing and radio in the show. In a word, it was a satirical lyrical revue about the city which is stepping out of a past that at the same time influences its future.

"We planned to continue working on our show this spring in Kharkiv. However, that is not possible right now, so Virlana is working on it in New York with American actors. I think it's good that today in an East Village theater they are singing about Kharkiv, remembering Iohansen, Meitus, the Ukrainian avantgarde and that wild and incomprehensible city on the Lopan. We must talk about ourselves, tell others

about ourselves. And this can't be done without jazz," Mr. Zhadan wrote.

In the 1920s, Mr. Kurbas created innovative productions with his Berezil Theatre hoping to create a modern urban culture in Soviet Ukraine that would transcend the difficult past and create a new vibrant Ukrainian community in the city. He did this with a diverse group of artists who looked to Europe, America and jazz for inspiration. Mr. Kurbas himself was from Western Ukraine (which was part of Poland in the 1920s) and was educated in Vienna.

Mr. Meller, Berezil's brilliant designer, was born in St. Petersburg and was of Swedish ancestry. He was educated in Kyiv and Munich, where he exhibited his art with Kandinsky, Klee and the artists of the Blue Rider Group, the most innovative visual group in the pre-World War I Germany.

Mr. Meitus, the composer for 15 Berezil

productions in Kharkiv, was from a Jewish family living in central Ukraine. He studied music with Heinrich Neuhaus and at the Music Institute in Kharkiv where he headed the first jazz band. All his scores for the Berezil Theatre were thought to be destroyed, until we located the score for "Hello, This Is Radio 477!"

The leading actress of the Berezil in Kharkiv was Valentyna Chystaikova, an ethnic Russian born in St Petersburg, while the leading actors, Yosyp Hirniak and Marian Krushelnysky, like Mr. Kurbas, came from Western Ukraine. Mr. Iohansen, the author of the core of the text of "Hello, This Is Radio 477!" was born in Kharkiv, and he was of Latvian heritage.

Mr. Kurbas brought together this amazingly diverse group of artists to help him create modern urban Ukrainian culture in Kharkiv. Unfortunately, many of these people and their work were destroyed in the purges of the 1930s. "Radio 477!" is a new theater piece, grounded in history, but about our relationship today to this past that is both so full of light, and always on the verge of darkness.

Currently, performers are again workshoping "Radio 477!" at the La MaMa rehearsal studios and are creating new scenes and rehearsing the music. The show is scheduled to be performed at PS21 in Chatham, N.Y., on August 19 and 20.

Many Ukrainians have made this part of New York their favorite summer spot. It is a short drive from Hunter, New Paltz, Albany and just down the road from the Plast Camp in East Chatham. For details see www.yaraartsgroup.net

Readers are invited to view Yara's work, talk to your neighbors about Russia's war in Ukraine and contribute to the Serhiy Zhadan Charitable Foundation through Razom and other organizations that support Ukraine's valiant fight for democracy and a free Ukraine today.