

Radio 477!

La MaMa's Ellen Stewart Theatre

March 10-19, 2023

It's radio that testifies to our existence
Our joy and our presence in space and the atmosphere
Radio waves and their message belong to the fearless
To those who dance on the winds of history

From "Dance" by Serhiy Zhadan translated into English
by Virlana Tkacz & Wanda Phipps with Anthony Coleman

Press in New York:

"Radio 477!" is a special work of theater. It is the re-imagining of a jazz musical revue that was performed in 1929 at the Berezil Theatre in Kharkiv, a booming industrial city in the 1920s. Photographs and programs from the original production have survived but script and music had been presumed lost or destroyed. The original creators, the director Les Kurbas, along with many other artists became the victims of Stalin's purges beginning in 1933... Virlana Tkacz, the founder/director of Yara Arts Group came upon the original musical score while doing research in Kharkiv before the invasion. Most of the script was lost but a list of the numbers could be reconstructed from programs, and the photographs from the original Berezil production provided visual information of the set, costumes and performance style... The renowned Ukrainian poet/rock star/novelist and anti-war activist, Serhiy Zhadan composed the script for the present production incorporating fragments from the original text... Anthony Coleman, inspired by Yuliy Meitus 1929 score, composed the music... Virlana Tkacz directed the American cast in a Brechtian style revue that mixes commentary on present and past political conditions with dance and song. Some of the text is spoken and sung in Ukrainian...

In the large space of the Ellen Stewart Theatre a dominant original set element is replicated: two large arcs lit up with hundreds of light bulbs frame the playing space; the lit-up arcs are first only seen through a scrim on which photographs of the original production are projected. Towards the end of the show the scrim curtain is pulled back to reveal a spiral of lit arcs receding towards the back of the theater. Set and graphics are by Waldemart Klyuzko with Evhen Kopiov, Margaret Peebles designed the lights with projections by Hoa Bai; costumes by Keiko Obremski, and sound design by Marek Soltis. The band of musicians, led by Anthony Coleman on piano, is present on the side of the performance space... After the opening performance, DJ Daria Kolomiec, placed upstage center, spun rock music to accompany the special poetry reading by Serhiy Zhadan (in Ukrainian) and Reginald Dwayne Betts (in English translation).

An ensemble of nine performers sings, dances, and comments through a collage of short sketches about life in Kharkiv... Time has become fluid and moves between the 1920s when Kharkiv was USSR's exemplary industrial city and 2022 when it is bombed into a ghost town... Under the direction of Ms. Virlana Tkacz and with choreography by Shigeko Sara Suga, the cast quick changes from absurd to straight, from non-sense verse to lyrical song and tender moments. The 80- minute non-stop performance is high octane. *Beate Hein Bennet, New York Theatre Wire, March 11, 2023*

The show demonstrates how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has interrupted and destroyed lives. The show was presented in English with Ukrainian spoken throughout. Lesya Verba, a performer from Odesa, used her beautiful voice to sing songs in Ukrainian. Petro Ninovskyi also lent his voice to shimmering songs in Ukrainian. Performances by George Drance, Susan Hwang, Silvana Gonzalez and Akiko Hiroshima were also incredibly strong.

The set design was exceptional, part of which was only revealed after a curtain fell in the third act. The glowing rings of the set, recreated from Vadym Meller's 1929 set for performances of the Berezil theater in Kharkiv, were assembled by a group headed by Waldemart Klyuzko. They presented the illusion of stepping into another world. The world was presented earlier in projections compiled by Mr. Klyuzko that included vintage photographs of the old city of Kharkiv and archival photos of the original 1929 jazz show at the Berezil. The current show, which drew the audience in with its visuals and music, revolved around the concepts of radio and theater and their connection to the city.

The performance reminds the audience that many people were arrested in Kharkiv in the 1930s, including the noted theater director Les Kurbas. Air raid sirens sounded at the end of Act 2, right before Act 3 began with news of the Russia's invasion. Act 3 ended with the actors transforming into the characters of the original 1929 photo in costumes recreated by Keiko Obremski. Time progressed and space opened, and the rings of the radio waves designed by Mr. Meller appeared... Throughout the show, the audience eagerly waited for Mr. Zhadan to appear, and he did not disappoint. Mr. Zhadan looked majestic with the rings behind him. Ukraine's past was evoked in present events. Daria Kolomiec, a DJ new to the stage of "Radio 477!!" improvised with music as Mr. Zhadan read his poems. At the end of the reading, Ms. Kolomiec brought everyone to their feet to dance. The idea of dancing for Ukraine and experiencing happiness even during a grave situation was inspiring. The audience left with music in their bodies. *Olena Jennings, Ukrainian Weekly, "Radio 477! Connects viewers with history, poetry and war-ravaged Kharkiv, April 30, 20203*



Photo by Theo Cote