



LES
KURBAS

NEW WORLDS

INSTALLATIONS

Les Kurbas: New Worlds – Installations
text by Virlana Tkacz,
designed by Waldemart Klyuzko
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KURBAS EXHIBITIONS

The installations described here were developed in a series of exhibitions about Les Kurbas's work. The curators of all these exhibits were: Virlana Tkacz, director of Yara Arts Group in New York, Tetiana Rudenko, head archivist of the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine in Kyiv, and Waldemart Klyuzko, an artist from Kyiv.

KURBAS IN KYIV was an exhibition at the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine in Kyiv from February 25, 2017 and extended to October 30, 2017. It was organized by Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine in Kyiv and Yara Arts Group from New York.

KURBAS IN KHARKIV was an exhibition at the Yermilov Centre in Kharkiv from January 18, 2018 to February 25, 2018. It was organized by the Yermilov Centre in Kharkiv, the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine in Kyiv and Yara Arts Group from New York.

KURBAS IN KHARKIV: *HELLO, THIS IS RADIO 477!* was an exhibition in the foyer of the Drama Theatre in Mukachevo, Ukraine from May 16 to 29, 2018. It was organized by Sloboda-Kult.

KURBAS: NEW WORLDS was an exhibition at the Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv from October 17 to December 2, 2018. It was organized by the Mystetskyi Arsenal, the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema of Ukraine in Kyiv and the Yara Arts Group from New York.

Les Kurbas: New Worlds – Installations

Les Kurbas was an innovative director who staged experimental theatre pieces in Kyiv and Kharkiv during the 1920s and transformed the idea of what theatre is. He created new worlds on stage that invited his audiences to clearly look through various layers of the present, review the past and imagine a new future.

Les Kurbas: New Worlds – Installations presents Les Kurbas's directorial concepts as installations, combining media and entering into a dialog through time with the innovative director.

First we address Kurbas's experimental work with his company — the Berezil Artistic Association — in Kyiv (1922–1926), focusing on three shows that examined fundamental issues in world theatre. Kurbas's innovative use of movement to create an exploding factory on stage is featured in his production of Georg Kaiser's *Gas*. In *Jimmie Higgins*, Kurbas integrated film and stage action to present the thoughts of a character, revealing the inner and outer reality of a human being. Kurbas's experiments with film made him one of the major artists at the source of the use of multimedia in theatre. In his production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Kurbas had his actors enter the stage as themselves and become the characters in the play in front of the audience, emphasizing the dual nature of the body (person) onstage. In four years, the Berezil Artistic Association grew from a small workshop to an organization with hundreds of participants, radically transforming Ukrainian theatre. Designs by Vadym Meller for Berezil productions were featured at international exhibitions in Paris (1925) and New York (1926).



In 1926, Kurbas's company became the Berezil National Theatre in Kharkiv, then the capital city, where Kurbas worked from 1926 to 1933. The Berezil productions presented Kharkiv as the new urban center of Ukraine. *Hello, This Is Radio 477!* imagined Kharkiv as a city in step with the latest trends in Europe. It was the first jazz musical revue in Ukraine and an entertaining critique of the old ways. Kurbas situated his production of *Myna Mazailo*, Mykola Kulish's comedy about urban stereotypes in Kharkiv, in Vadym Meller's cosmic set to expose the impact the past and future can have on our daily decisions. Kurbas hoped his theatre would transform the city and create a new urban culture, but his dreams were derailed by politics. This publication presents the installations that show the innovations that defined Kurbas as one of the outstanding experimental theatre directors of the early 20th century.

Kurbas collaborated with designer Vadym Meller, who created Constructivist sets that resemble sculptures or installations rather than typical theatre decor. Meller's constructions formed complex, multilevel places for action that did not adhere to a single-point perspective, but were fragmentary planes similar to those used by Cubists and Suprematists

Installations: Turning Theatrical Moments into Art Objects

by *Virlana Tkacz*

Theatre is an event, an artistic work that exists for a limited time. Then it disappears. What remain are materials used in the preparation (texts and sketches), objects that were part of the performance (costumes and props), as well as photos that document a production. There are also reviews, advertisements, programs and posters. But none of these elements are the art that Les Kurbas created. They only point to what the director created on stage.

To present Kurbas's innovations we have to present his directorial concepts. While these concepts are not physical objects, by bringing together documentation and reconstructions we can show you the essence of his ideas and innovations in theatre. Kurbas was not interested in copying life in his productions, but in

constructing new worlds. Therefore, we do not simply copy his productions. Rather, we construct a series of installations, each of which allows us to glimpse a single directorial idea that inspired a Berezil production.

I am a theatre director and I created these installations together with Kyiv artist Waldemart Klyuzko, using materials we duplicated from the archives and parts of sets that we reconstructed. I then combined these with recordings of contemporary actors reading scenes from plays and memoirs to bring Kurbas's ideas to life. We developed our installations during a series of exhibitions on Les Kurbas 2017-2018 that we co-curated with Tetiana Rudenko, head archivist of the Museum of Theatre, Music and Cinema in Kyiv. Each of these installations attempts to turn an ephemeral theatrical moment into something more enduring and allows the exhibition-goer to enter into the world Kurbas created on stage.





HELLO, THIS IS RADIO 477!



The Berezil production of *Hello, This Is Radio 477!* -- the first jazz musical revue in Ukraine -- was staged by four young directors under Kurbas's supervision. We do not have a script, but recently the conductor's score of the show has been located in the Museum at the Shevchenko Theatre in Kharkiv. It features all the music composed for the first and third act by Yuliy Meitus and a second act by Bohdan Kryzhanivsky, which includes arrangements of popular American dance tunes, such as the Shimmy and the Charleston. We also found dozens of beautiful photographs of the show at the Theatre Museum.

For our installation, "Kharkiv, Kharkiv" (3:45 minutes, 2018), I decided to create a line of photographs that would visually relate the story of the show. I then "accompanied" this photographic story-board with reproductions of pages from the original score. The hit song, "Kharkiv, Kharkiv," began and ended my "photo-score." Previously, I had recorded jazz pianist Fima Chupakhin playing this song. He suggested that he additionally play several improvisations on the theme, which we also recorded. I had asked Mykola Shkaraban to sing with one of Fima's recordings, and Tania Mychajlyshyn D'Avignon shot a video of his performance at a lecture I did. For the installation, I inserted a small monitor that played this video above the notes at the end of my "photo-score." It is interesting to note that in the original bound score for the Berezil production, this song had been moved from the end of the show to the beginning. I inserted copies of the notes in both places and had three of Fima's brief improvisations accompany our viewing of the "photo-score."



According to all accounts, the focus of the Berezil production of *Hello, This Is Radio 477!* was a stunning set by Vadym Meller. Our installation, "Radio Waves" (15 minutes, 2018), combined Meller's set for the Berezil, reconstructed by BerezilBud #7, with a light design score by Yevhen Kopyov. The circles of light lit up in turn and then in sections, pulsating and creating various patterns that highlighted the amazing structure and composition of Vadym Meller's design. This installation became the most photographed object both in the Kharkiv and Arsenal exhibitions. It was also the stage for most of the special events we arranged for this exhibition. Especially moving was the presentation of the music of several songs from the show by a group of young musicians from Kharkiv led by one of New York's best-known improvisational pianist Anthony Coleman.

We make our musicians learn contemporary industrial rhythms, as they are expressed today in American dances, but have them use traditional Ukrainian melodies

О СУЧАСНОЇ ІНДУСТРІАЛЬНОЇ РИТМІЦІ, ЯК ВОНА НА
НАПРИКЛАД В АМЕРИКАНСЬКИХ ТАНКАХ, МИ ПРИВЧАЄМО
Я ЦЬОГО УКРАЇНСЬКУ НАРОДНУ МЕЛОДІЮ

СAL RHYTHMS, AS THEY ARE
TYPICAL AMERICAN MELODIES

... FOR HELLO,
... IS RADIO 4771

