

Necessity as the Mother of Invention

A Personal Account of Creating Worldwide Play Projects in Support of Belarus and Ukraine

John Freedman



Background

I spent most of the first four days after Russia sent tanks into Ukraine in February 2022 in a state of denial, outrage, and paralysis. I had lived and worked as a writer and theatre journalist in Moscow from September 1988 to November 2018, at which time I relocated to Greece (Freedman 2022a). I perceived the invasion as a personal affront. It was even more personal because my wife Oksana Mysina was a prominent Ukrainian-born Russian actress whose career was adversely impacted by her active public opposition to Russian military activities in her homeland of Donbas in 2014. When I saw the news of what we now call the full-scale invasion at approximately 5:30 a.m. on 24 February 2022, I did what I never do: I walked into our bedroom and awakened Oksana.

“They attacked,” I said. “War has begun.”

Oksana unleashed a howl that still makes my skin crawl to remember it, two and a half years later.

From that moment forward we became media zombies, grasping at information coming out of Kyiv via every available source: television, YouTube, social media, telephone calls, and personal messages. We were benumbed and incapacitated. It seemed as if this ghastly state of siege would never end. We were plunged into our own personal version of Sartre's *No Exit*.

And then—if you'll pardon the schmaltzy drama of it—on 28 February I received a text message out of the blue. William Wong, the founder and artistic director of Blank Space Studio in Hong Kong, wrote, "I am wondering if we can do a worldwide reading of a Ukrainian play to support them?" (Wong 2022).

It was as if he had thrown a bucket of ice water over me, and switched on a bright light bulb.

I had received a similarly unexpected message from the Belarusian playwright Andrei Kureichik in early September 2020. Kureichik's email had come hard on the heels of the failed August attempt at a revolution in Minsk, Belarus's capital city, following a blatantly bogus presidential election. Kureichik told me he had written a play and wondered if I would translate it and organize "a few" readings.

After a month of feeling hopeless about the turn of events in Belarus where hundreds, even thousands of citizens were thrown into prison, tortured, and some killed, Kureichik had given me a priceless gift—an opportunity to help, rather than to feel helpless, and a chance to share a sense of agency with others. In a quarter of an hour I had enlisted about 10 theatres in four countries who committed themselves to staging readings of Kureichik's *Insulted. Belarus*, as soon as I, or they—in the event that they were in Europe—could translate it. Kureichik himself organized the first reading of the original Russian text on 12 September 2020 with his frequent collaborator Serhiy Pavliuk, the artistic director of the Kulish Academic Music and Drama Theatre of Kherson, Ukraine. The first reading I helped organize took place, also in Russian, on 17 September at Igor Golyak's Arlekin Players Theatre in Boston. The first segments of the play in English were performed on 18 September in a Zoom reading by actors collaborating with Kristin Marting's HERE in New York, while the full English-language premiere took place a few hours later, as directed for a Zoom stream by Guillermo Cienfuegos at Rogue Machine Theatre in Los Angeles. Three theatres staged readings on 19 September—Bryan Brown's ARTEL/Maketank in Exeter, UK; Vladimir Rovinsky and Lisa Channer's Theatre Novi Most in Minneapolis, MN; and a reading staged by Chris Humphrey for Shrewd Productions in Austin, TX. By the end of September, just two weeks after the beginning of what was later to be known as the *Insulted. Belarus* Worldwide Readings Project, I had arranged for 20 readings. Over the first two years of the project, that number grew to 200, and as I write this in October 2024, the number of readings, productions, videos, films, installations, and other kinds of events inspired by Kureichik's writings stands at over 280. For the record, William Wong and his Blank Space Studio mounted four different readings in the first ten months of the project, and arranged for the translation of *Insulted. Belarus* into Cantonese and Mandarin.

Figure 1. (facing page) Veronika Streltsova in Planting an Apple Tree by Iryna Harets, directed by Paul Bargetto at ProEnglish Theatre, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2022. (Photo by Artem Galkin)

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Figure 3. From left, back, Daumantas Ciunis, Arvydas Dapšys, Tomas Stirna, Agnė Šataitė, Neringa Būtytė; front, Tomas Rinkūnas and Mindaugas Capas in *Insulted. Belarus* by Andrei Kureichik, directed by Gabriele Tuminaite. Vilnius State Small Theatre of Lithuania, 2020. (Photo by Laura Vanseviciene)

In *Belarusian Theatre and the 2020 Pro-Democracy Protests*, Valleri J. Robinson writes:

The play *Insulted. Belarus* and Freedman and Kureichik's Worldwide Reading Project generated a remarkable and powerful network of theatre artists and scholars who found unique ways to participate in the project. In addition to 30 translations, hundreds of live and digital readings, live performances, and film screenings, there were dozens of publications, numerous fundraising events, and a website (insultedbelarus.com) launched by Bryan Brown to ensure that events surrounding the 2020 presidential election in Belarus are not forgotten. The astonishing scale of the project mobilizing international artists, which grew yet again following the start of the Russian war against Ukraine, testifies to the power and potential of art workers to work together to resist autocracy. (2024:25–26)

This brings me back to Wong's 28 February 2022 message. He had every reason to expect readings of Ukrainian works. But what transpired almost immediately exceeded both Wong's and my expectations. I wrote him on 4 March: "Do you see what an avalanche you unleashed?!?! You asked about doing a play and now we've got over 40 theatres in 14 countries coming along!" (Freedman 2022b). Thus began what later would be named the Worldwide Ukrainian Play Reading project. I did not know what play or plays we would be offering. I had no concrete ideas, no set plans to follow. But I had contacts all over the world, and, when I reached out to them, the vast majority responded positively. In the next few days two trusted old friends/colleagues—the Ukrainian playwright Maksym (Max) Kurochkin and the inimitable theatre ambassador Philip Arnoult—entered the picture. They helped me expand the new project significantly.

Figure 2. (facing page) From left, Nathan Malin, Will Manning, and Bill Irwin in staged reading of *Just Tell No One*, a mashup of *Just Tell No One* by Oksana Savchenko, with *Bad Roads* and *Three Rendezvous* by Natalka Vorozhbyt, directed by Igor Golyak. David Rubenstein Atrium at Lincoln Center, NYC, 2023. (Photo by Pavel Antonov; courtesy of Arlekin Players Theatre)



Figure 4. First row, from left, Andrew CHAN Xiyong (Hong Kong), Jumbo LAM (Hong Kong), Sheng Hao YANG (Taiwan); second row, from left, SENG Soo Ming (Malaysia), Cindy CHEUNG Ka Wai (Hong Kong), Zelda Tatiana NG (Singapore); third row, Chien Hui YEN (Taiwan) in *Insulted. Belarus* by Andrei Kureichik, directed by William Wong for Zoom stream, hosted by Blank Space Studio, Hong Kong, 2020. (Screenshot by John Freedman)

There was great demand almost immediately, but I had precious little supply at hand. I began asking colleagues for information about existing English translations of recent Ukrainian dramas. Nataoka Vorozhbyt gave me permission to share her plays in Sasha Dugdale's translations, including the internationally produced *Bad Roads*, a hard-hitting piece about the Russian occupation of Donbas and Luhansk that began in 2014. The American scholar and translator Molly Flynn told me that Kurochkin was on the verge of opening a new venue in Kyiv called the Theatre of Playwrights (ToP), and that he had a stash of new texts on the verge of going public. Kurochkin was a friend of 25 years; I had translated 20 of his plays.¹ We hadn't been in touch since he departed Moscow for Kyiv in 2017 and I left Moscow for Greece in 2018. Furthermore, at this very moment he was devoting his time to service in the Territorial Defense Forces of the Ukrainian Army, not to running a theatre. But however difficult the current circumstances were, this was the ideal opportunity to renew both our friendship and our professional collaboration.

A digest of our first exchanges in the early days of March goes something like this:

"Max! I am rallying international support for Ukraine and Ukrainian drama. I'm told you have a bunch of new texts. I need them as soon as possible."

"I can't do it, John. In light of the situation, everything I have is old and worthless. The texts I have now are the product of an entirely different era. They may be of interest as relics someday, but right now they would only make the wrong impression. However, if someone could commission some new works, I think we could make that happen."

1. My translations of Kurochkin's plays include: *Dulcey and Roxy at City Hall*, Breaking String Theater, Austin, TX, directed by Graham Schmidt, 2014; *Kitchen*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, directed by Kate Mendeloff, 2010, and published in *Real and Phantom Pains: An Anthology of New Russian Drama*, comp./ed. John Freedman, New Academia, 2014; *Repress and Excite*, published in *Theatre Forum* 34, 2009; *The Schooling of Bento Bonchev*, Breaking String Theater, Austin, TX, directed by Graham Schmidt, 2012, and Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, Kogod Theatre, University of Maryland, directed by Yuri Urnov, 2017, and published in *Performing Arts Journal* 32, 2, 2010.

I immediately thought of another old friend and partner, Philip Arnoult of the Center for International Theatre Development (CITD) in Baltimore. If anybody would jump into action in a case like this, it would be Philip.

I wrote to Max: “Okay. What are we talking about? Would \$500 per short work be fair?”

“John. \$500 for a short work would be perfectly acceptable money in good times. These are not good times. I think we’re talking \$1,000 per text.”

I shot off an email to Arnoult. We jumped on Zoom and I told him the story.

“I can send \$15,000 tomorrow, John,” Philip said. “This is precisely what CITD exists for.”

Meanwhile, another longtime colleague, Noah Birksted-Breen, the founder of Sputnik Theatre in London, put up another \$1,000, which, when added to the CITD grants, meant we had now funded a total of 16 writers. Noah admitted to me that his theatre’s bank account at the moment was seriously depleted, yet he felt compelled to participate. This willingness to dig deep for a noble cause lies at the heart of everything that characterizes both the *Insulted. Belarus* Worldwide Readings Project and the Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings (WUPR). It is what has kept these vehicles running for years. Later, Arnoult and CITD made numerous other grants to the writers of the Theatre of Playwrights, and to the venue itself, allowing it to acquire new equipment, carry out renovations, conduct a festival, and meet rental payments as life in conditions of war turned out to be merciless.

Due to unsurprising snags with banking systems and other payment services, it took a while for those original grants to reach the writers, some of whom were still in Kyiv, but many of whom were scattered throughout Europe. And yet, before the Theatre of Playwrights began to see grant money arrive, they started sending me texts written literally one or two days before. Four were written in Russian. I translated those hastily, getting them out to theatres, drama clubs, and universities to rehearse and perform almost without delay.

Language and the time spent translating were not a significant obstacle in the *Insulted. Belarus* project. At first I worked with just the one play. Then over the next two years I added three more: Kureichik’s important verbatim piece, *Voices of the New Belarus*; *Backbone*²; and *One Half of One Year* by Viktoria Koval. Each of these plays was written in Russian, my professional and adopted second language. As the fledgling Ukrainian project developed, it became evident that this would be a vastly different venture than the *Insulted. Belarus* project. Time was now a major obstacle. Instead of translating just one play and fine-tuning it a few last times before sending it off to live its own life, I needed to do many translations as more and more texts arrived. Time I can deal with; if necessary, I can work 18 hours a day. The matter of language is a far greater obstacle. The vast majority of texts sent to me were in Ukrainian, which most lifelong Russian-language speakers and writers were switching to in order to avoid the language of the invader. My Russian is fluent, and I have a decent reading knowledge of Polish. On my own, I was in no position to produce professional, performable, or publishable translations of contemporary Ukrainian drama. I needed help.

First to join me was John Farndon, a London-based poet, author, multilingual translator, and general cultural powerhouse. Farndon and I had crossed paths on a pair of projects involving *Insulted. Belarus*, but now he stepped up in a significant way. Like me, Farndon was in a position, and of a mind, to donate time and labor to the Ukrainian cause—and it must be said that, aside from a handful of commercial projects and the rare grant, Farndon and I have done the lion’s share of our work as volunteers, often on rush schedules. We never allocated the territory quite so neatly, but the reality usually was that Farndon took on texts earmarked for performance in the UK, while I took on texts for the US. At the time of this writing John Farndon has translated 30 texts. I have translated about 100.

How could I possibly have done that? Well, it was thanks in small part to serendipity and in large part to Nataliia Bratus, a cousin of my wife Oksana. In the early days following the full-scale invasion, Oksana reached out to Nataliia, her daughter, and her grandson in Dnipro, a city in the eastern half of Ukraine. Oksana encouraged them to evacuate to Crete where we would help

2. The playwright wishes to remain anonymous as the situation in Belarus is still dangerous.



Figure 5. Christina Rubruck in *Insulted. Belarus* by Andrei Kureichik, directed by Jürgen Popig at Theater und Orchester Heidelberg, Germany, 2021. (Screenshot of Zoom video by John Freedman)

them settle safely. This put a native Ukrainian speaker within walking distance of my home. It didn't take long before Nataliia agreed to assist me. I would sit at my computer, she would take a seat behind me in my favorite easy chair, and between us, with our differing degrees of knowledge of various languages, we began a creative partnership that I—only partly in jest—have come to call the Lennon-McCartney or Glimmer Twins of translation from Ukrainian into English. Understand my

motives correctly when I reveal that I turned down an award for my translations when I was told I could not share it with Nataliia. To take the prize myself was unthinkable. Teamwork, shared labor, shared experience, and a shared cause were at the root of both reading projects from the very beginning. They remain core qualities.

The Forces Moving Both Worldwide Readings Projects

Although the Belarus and Ukraine projects arose for similar reasons, and have drawn on similar (though not identical) communities to flourish, they largely have been aided and driven by divergent forces. While the second project began just 18 months after the first, it differs starkly from the other.

The Covid pandemic was instrumental in helping to create something of a perfect storm for the running of the *Insulted. Belarus* Worldwide Readings Project. Remember that it was inaugurated in September 2020 when enormous numbers of people around the globe were living in various states of lockdown.

Actors and directors were unable to work, unable to mingle with their colleagues, unable even, in some cases, to leave their homes. The hunger for work combined with the need for creative activity was enormous. Theatremaker and scholar Bryan Brown has written that “the pandemic’s importance for the impact of the Worldwide Readings Project cannot be overstated,” also pointing out that, “the role that digital technology [...] played in the move from protest to play-text in the Worldwide Readings Project cannot be underestimated” (2023:3). Indeed, the combination of isolation due to the pandemic and the use of Zoom to overcome the isolation led to some extraordinary results. Members of Zoom-based reading clubs in Benelux and Nigeria gathered before their computers in large numbers to read and discuss Kureichik’s play. For a staged reading at State Small Theatre of Vilnius, Lithuania, Gabriele Tuminaite set up cameras around the hall and streamed the live performance on Zoom. Bulgarian director Javor Gardev created a performance of the Ivan Radoev Drama and Puppet Theatre, maintaining social distance among the performers. He filmed the single performance, edited it, and uploaded it for streaming. Oksana Mysina, working with colleagues in several countries, had actors film themselves, performing their parts in both of Kureichik’s plays; then she edited the raw footage into films, which included historical footage from the protests made available by the Russian opposition Rain TV channel. Guillermo Cienfuegos used Zoom’s portrait mode to focus primarily on each performer as they spoke their lines in a YouTube stream that had over 30,000 views between its premiere in late September 2020 and October 2024. The online readings mounted by William Wong via his Blank Space Studio in Hong Kong often filled a static, checkerboard-like screen with each box showing performers live, whether they were acting or waiting to act. It attracted upwards of 35,000 viewers.

Kureichik wrote *Insulted. Belarus* as a series of seven monologs, which worked very well for streaming. As Bryan Brown notes: “While Kureichik did not conceive the play for these platforms,



Figure 6. Courtney Brechemin (left) and Randall Wulff in *Insulted. Belarus* by Andrei Kureichik, directed by Frédérique Michel. City Garage Theater, Santa Monica, CA, 2023. (Photo by Paul M. Rubenstein)

its format—essentially one of monologues delivered to the audience—was perfectly suited to them” (2023:4). The readings of *Insulted. Belarus* filled the void left by the dearth of knowledge and understanding of Belarus and its people. In countless online post-reading discussions, I heard two basic comments over and over: 1) spectators were grateful for having the opportunity to learn more about a country and a historical event of which they knew virtually nothing, and 2) they were fascinated and frightened by the similarities between hotly contested elections taking place at nearly the same time in Belarus and the United States.

Again and again, I was asked, “Could someone like Lukashenko steal an election in the US?” Many spectators came to Kureichik’s play seeking answers about what was, or could be, happening in the United States. As for the violence on the streets of Minsk, it was covered with less and less frequency in the international press from August to November 2020, and even when given air time, the coverage rarely illuminated the historical background or current social nuances as well as Kureichik’s play. In this period preceding Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the world at large, including many in the community of Slavic scholars, still perceived Belarus in the shadow of Russia, its dominant eastern neighbor. Few were yet talking specifically or in depth about Russia’s historical imperial designs, imposing its politics and culture on others. For the most part, it was simply a given that Russia was the dominant polity in the area, a focal point toward which people gazed past Belarus or Ukraine. Not even the bogus referendums that Russia employed to occupy Ukrainian territory in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014 triggered much talk about Russian imperialism. Certainly a quickly quashed revolution in the little-known nation of Belarus was not sufficient to bring that topic to the fore.

That changed abruptly with Russia’s march on Kyiv in February 2022. Ukrainian scholars, historians, journalists, and writers—echoed by many in the West—began advancing the imperial theme forcefully. Historian Timothy Snyder wed the notion of Russia’s imperialism with its colonialism in regards to the war in Ukraine:

One thing I’m confident about is that this will be seen as a colonial war. There are other ways to characterise it, but it is a colonial war in the sense that Russia meant to conquer, dominate

displace, exploit. And it's an imperial war in the sense that in choosing to fight this war, Russian elites were self-consciously defining themselves as an empire as opposed to a normal state. So, I think these core definitions of colonial and imperial will likely be terms that historians will be using in the future. (in Bendas 2023)

But even if people thought the crushing of the revolution in Belarus was an internal national affair (with tacit and tactical support from Russia), the brutal onslaught that Russia unleashed on Ukraine was another beast entirely, regardless of whether it was an imperial or colonial act. Despite Vladimir Putin's cynical designation of the invasion as a "special military operation," this was, in fact, a brazen act of war on a scale not seen in Europe since World War II.

All of this is important for the way that perceptions of the two different reading projects were formed among audiences, as well as among participating writers, directors, and actors. If the Belarus project served primarily as educational outreach and a way to foster solidarity with a populace engaging in political resistance, the Ukraine project was, from the very beginning, a defiant and calculated act of resistance. To one degree or another, virtually everyone involved in the readings understood that they were engaging in efforts to counteract Putin's absurd claim that there was no such thing as Ukrainian culture, language, or statehood. I have no doubt that my collaborators knew this because I stated it explicitly in the hundreds of emails I sent out inviting colleagues to join the project. Putin's view, expressed in a handful of articles and speeches from July 2021 to the final hours before the 2022 invasion, was that the culture, language, and statehood of Ukraine were merely subordinate attributes of Russian culture, language, and statehood (Putin 2021 and 2022). Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko orchestrated and calculated the theft of an election, and his brutal retaliation against citizens protesting his actions motivated many people. But Putin's essentially genocidal actions, performed by a huge invading army laying waste to Ukraine as it moved on Kyiv, existed on an entirely different level.

The news blitz covering the invasion of Ukraine was such that very few people encountering the Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings, even early on, lacked information about the topic. They came to the project informed, engaged, and outraged, whether their entry point (less often) was the "soft invasion" of 2014 and its aftermath, or the (more often) highly publicized buildup of some 200,000 Russian troops on the Ukrainian border in early 2022. If the Belarus project surprised people, the Ukraine project took root in well-tilled, deeply nuanced informational and emotional terrain.

Throughout the Belarus project the collection of donations for prisoners of conscience and for refugees was sporadic and relatively rare. It was not a core condition for participation. If I could go back and do this aspect differently, I most certainly would. But the purpose of the first project was to raise awareness, to shine a spotlight on the unjust and cruel actions in Belarus. The Ukraine project benefited from the Belarus experience. It was bolder, more specific, and more proactive from the outset. Nataka Vorozhbyt was the first to tell me that she would be happy to make her works available without an honorarium as long as fundraising was an integral part of every public event. Encouraged by her, I sought and received permission from all the participating writers to offer their works for one-off readings as long as organizers collected donations for Ukrainian charities. Commercial productions were handled in a traditional way, with contracts and payments. I distributed a list of a dozen trustworthy charitable organizations—all based in Ukraine to avoid overhead being siphoned off outside the country—but allowed each theatre to make its own choices about where it would direct the donations it collected. Some found their own destination for contributions, or used them to support Ukrainian refugees in their hometowns. I acted only as an advisor in this matter. Keeping full track of the amount of money gifted to various Ukrainian charities or organizations has been impossible, but incomplete statistics suggest that fundraising has been a success. I know that readings of Nataka Vorozhbyt's play *Bad Roads* have generated no less than US\$60,000. A single reading of *Bad Roads* mounted by William Wong in Hong Kong brought in \$16,000. As I wrote earlier, CITD made grants totaling over \$40,000 for the Theatre of Playwrights. By extrapolating known fundraising figures for roughly one quarter of the total events,



Figure 7. From left, Emil Ljungestig, Mia Höglund-Melin, Ashkan Ghods, Carina M. Johansson, and Hans Brorson in *Bad Roads* by Natalka Vorozhbyt, directed by Tamara Turnova. Göteborgs Stadsteater, Sweden, 2023. (Photo by Ola Kjelbye)

I can say that a minimum of \$600,000 was raised in the first two and a half years of the program. Not an earth-shattering number, but we have done our share of good.

Arguably, however, the greatest contribution of the Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings has been in the sphere of promoting writers and their work, of giving them a sense of purpose and agency. We have actively refuted Putin's claims that Ukrainian language and culture do not exist. A leading Ukrainian theatre journalist wrote about the project in 2023:

The statistics of this project demonstrate incredible numbers in the history of Ukrainian drama—our drama has never been translated and read so much. Separately, it should be noted that at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, most translators around the world worked on a volunteer basis. This demonstrates an act of unprecedented global solidarity of the theatre community united in the face of the barbaric crime against humanity committed by the Russian Federation. (Gaishenets 2023)



Figure 8. Tim Sweeney and a puppet made by Tim Habberger in *Survivor's Syndrome* by Andriy Bondarenko in a PushPush Arts production in the Experimental Puppetry Theater Festival at The Center for Puppetry Arts, Atlanta, 2023. (Photo by Stacey Bode)

Consider the impact of the project on some of the writers. It's no surprise that texts by Natalka Vorozhbyt—one of Ukraine's most prominent writers, film directors, activists, and public figures—were performed over 60 times. In 2022, her film, *Bad Roads*, was Ukraine's national nomination for the Academy Awards' best foreign film competition. But consider the international success of writers who were not known outside of small circles in their homeland: Olena Astasieva's *Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War*, comprised of pithy explications of "Panic," "Fear," "Hunger," "Betrayal," "Hatred," "Love," and many more, was presented over 110 times and made into a short film by



Figure 9. Teona Dimova in *My Tara* by Liudmyla Tymoshenko directed by Yevgenia Shermeneva for a video stream produced by KATLZ Riga, Latvia, 2023. (Screenshot by John Freedman; <https://youtu.be/IL8uYJRCFhM?si=0AzJ5Zlfn712MUOS>)

the US filmmaker Leah Loftin. Works by Andriy Bondarenko—primarily his poetic *Survivor's Syndrome*, which starts as one phase of a man's life ends and concludes with the beginning of a forthcoming new life—have also been performed 110 times. Most of the members of the Theatre of Playwrights have had significant success. Liudmyla Tymoshenko's works, such as her *My Tara*, a retelling of themes from *Gone with the Wind* through the prism of her own life in Ukraine, have been performed 55 times; both Oksana

Savchenko and Nataliia Blok have each had their texts performed 50 times; Iryna Harets, 45 times; Oksana Grytsenko, 35 times; Tetiana Kytsenko, 30 times; Kurochkin, Anastasiia Kosodii, and Julia Gonchar, each 25 times; Ihor Bilyts, 20 times; Pavlo Arie, Lena Lagushonkova, Olena Hapicieva, and Kateryna Penkova, each 15 times; Vitaliy Chenskiy and Olha Maciupa, each a dozen times.

This list—consisting exclusively of writers of the Theatre of Playwrights—highlights that we have worked closely with this theatre from the very beginning. But we have also reached out to a large number of Ukrainian writers based in many different countries. As of this writing, we are offering 190 titles created by 70 writers. While John Farndon, Nataliia Bratus, and I have done the lion's share of translations into English, we also offer the work of 13 other English-language translators, among whom Victoria Somoff at Dartmouth College has distinguished herself with excellent translations of texts by Tetiana Kytsenko, Artem Lebedev, and Maryna Smilianets. Over 15 translators have made works available in 14 other languages, with Lydia Nagel, Elli Salo, and Raluca Rădulescu doing prodigious work in their respective homelands of Germany, Finland, and Romania. As of this writing, WUPR has midwived over 660 readings, productions, videos, streams, films, screenings, installations, and publications of contemporary Ukrainian texts in 32 countries and 19 languages.

As noted previously I launched the project with some hastily gathered texts. One of the first writers to be performed was Olga Braga, a playwright and comedian. Her *Return to Sender* was performed nine times early on, including at the first major US reading at the Drama League of New York on 19 March 2022. Also presented at that event was Oleksandr Viter's 2014 play *Labyrinth*, translated by Tetiana Shilhar. Neda Nejdana, one of the most popular and important writers presented in the project, had her work's first appearance, in a French translation, in a series of readings held 8 March 2022 by the publisher and theatremaker Dominique Dolmieu. Nejdana's first presentation in English, as translated by John Farndon, was on 3 April at the School of Theatre and Dance at Northern Illinois University. Subsequently, in translations also by Farndon, her plays *Otvetka@UA*, *Pussycat in Memory of Darkness*, *Maidan Inferno*, and *Closed Sky* were read in many cities around the world.

Pussycat in Memory of Darkness received a major production in 2022 at the Finborough Theatre in London and then toured to Ukraine, Germany, Portugal, and the United States into 2023. *Closed Sky* received its world premiere in English in a Ukrainian production at the Wiesbaden Staatstheater in Germany in 2024. In late 2022, Nejdana's *He Who Opens the Door* was performed at A Play, A Pie and A Pint cabaret theatre in Glasgow and then toured to Edinburgh and Aberdeen. In all, as of this writing, Nejdana's texts have been produced, read,



Figure 10. From left: Dan Vynohradov and Yuriy Kozhukharov in *Robinson* by Vitaliy Chenskiy, directed by Rick St. Peter. ProEnglish Theatre, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2022. (Photo by Artem Galkin)

or filmed 36 times in 12 countries. Nina Zakhoshenko's *I'm Fine* has been performed 20 times; Maryna Smilianets's *Borscht. Great-Grandmas' Recipes for Survival* and *A Prayer for Elvis*, 11 times; Oleksandr Viter's *Give Me a Taste of the Sun*, 9 times; Polina Pologentseva's *Save the Light*, 8 times, and Tasia Pugach's *Dialogues*, 6 times. Inna Goncharova's *The Trumpeter*, translated by Farndon, opened in English for a limited run in Wiesbaden, Germany, in February 2024, then transferred to the Finborough in London for a three-week run. Two productions of Vorozhbyt's *Bad Roads*—directed by Andrew Kushnir at Crow's Theatre in Toronto, and by Tamara Trunova at the Stadsteater in Göteborg, Sweden—played for extended runs of four and five weeks, respectively. The Canadian production garnered Best International Play and Best Director of a Play awards from the Toronto Theatre Critics' Awards in 2024. Kushnir won a Dora Mavor Moore award for outstanding direction for the same production. Another significant production was of Andriy Bondarenko's *Ghost Land*, a play commissioned by the City Garage Theatre in Santa Monica, and directed by Frédérique Michel in September–October 2023.

When the members of the Theatre of Playwrights began sending me texts in March 2022, it took little time for me to realize that a book was already in the process of coming together. The texts were short, making it possible to fit all the authors together under one cover. They were complementary, but not homogenous. All of them—whether they were angry, despairing, shocked, ironic, or subtle—spoke with eloquence and unbridled defiance about the experience of living in a country that was attacked by its neighbor.

Oksana Savchenko's *I Want to Go Home* riffs on the tragic events that have stolen, disfigured, and violated her homeland. Tetiana Kytsenko's *Call Things by their Names* ruminates aggressively on how names and words are capable of creating or destroying a sense of national identity and well-being. Olha Matsiupa's *Flowering* mixes poetry and wistful memories about places she has never been,



Figure 11. From left: Yolanda Mitchell and Louise Stewart in *He Who Opens the Door* by Neda Nejdana, directed by Becky Hope-Palmer. *A Play A Pie and A Pint*, Glasgow, Scotland, 2022. (Photo by 2MagepiesTheatre)

repeatedly offering the poignant refrain, “Ukraine will never go anywhere...”—clearly expressing the opposite. Pavlo Arie’s *Diary of Survival of a Civilian Urbanite in Conditions of War* is constructed



Figure 12. Kate Vostrikova in *Otvetka@UA* by Neda Nejdana, directed by Sally Beck Wippman, for a video stream produced by Finborough Theatre, London, 2022. (Screenshot by John Freedman; https://youtu.be/1A_vv78nW3M?si=T8UEzL0WmBCWqRAS)

like a diary, showing how he fits in with but does not share the almost universal wartime enthusiasm. Ihor Bilyts’s brief *The Russian Soldier* is a dialog about the final visit of a Russian soldier to his pregnant wife after his death. The play is cleverly written using Russian syntax and vocabulary, but spelling everything with Ukrainian letters. Olena Hapicieva’s *In the Bowels of the Earth* is a hybrid, experimental text that plays with dialog, prose, memory, and disembodied voices to represent the confusion and hell of life in a bomb shelter. Oksana Grytsenko’s *The Peed-Upon Armored Personnel Carrier* is a whimsical tale about some rural residents resisting as best

they can a small Russian force occupying in their village. Maksym Kurochkin’s *Three Attempts to Improve Daily Life* is an understated tale of death and mundane life on the front lines.

I had no doubt that, as a group, these specific texts would offer a rare, visceral, and memorable glimpse into a national state of mind at a historic flashpoint. Moreover, they would prove to be



Figure 13. From left, Brooke Hardman-Ditchfield, Amanda Bruton, Amy Barrow, Chelsea McCarthy, and Mac Young in *Give Me a Taste of the Sun* by Oleksandr Viter directed by Kelly O'Donnell at Stages on the Sound/Tectonic Theater Project, Brooklyn, 2022. (Photo by Scott Barrow)



Figure 14. From left: Nataliia Rybalkina and Andriy Kasianov (who enlisted in the Ukrainian army and was killed in August 2024) in *Give Me a Taste of the Sun* by Oleksandr Viter, directed by Jill Navarre. ProEnglish Theatre, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2022. (Photo by Artem Galkin)



Figure 15. From left: Lev & Olga Frayman (musician/singers), Barbra Berlovitz, Adelin Phelps, Paul de Cordova, and Sun Mee Chomet in *I Want to Go Home* by Oksana Savchenko, directed by Lisa Channer and Vladimir Rovinsky. Jungle Theatre, Minneapolis, MN, produced by Theatre Novi Most of Minneapolis, 2022. (Photo by Bill Prouty)

reading-friendly, with theatres selecting as many as five or six texts to provide a varied evening of work that still would not exceed 90 to 100 minutes. Encouraged by the French publisher Dominique Dolmieu, I contacted Nina Kamberos, the founder of Laertes Press in North Carolina about my ideas for the book. She replied the same day, encouraging me to submit whatever I wished: she was prepared to do anything to help Ukraine. Thus began the road to the publication of the anthology, *A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War: 20 Short Works by Ukrainian Playwrights*, which drew its title from Astasieva's play. The book was published in early January 2023 under the publisher's Egret Acting Editions imprint. A second, expanded iteration was published on 3 October 2023, also under the Egret imprint. *A Dictionary* was followed by two other books culled from my readings projects: *Insulted. Belarus and Voices of the New Belarus: Two Plays of Revolution* by Andrei Kureichik (Kureichik 2023); and Andriy Bondarenko's *Ghost Land* (Bondarenko 2023). Several more books are now in the works. *A Dictionary of Emotions* subsequently placed 21st in the Telegraph Culture Desk's 50 best books of 2023, and was awarded a bronze IPPY (Independent Publisher Book Awards) in the category of Current Events: Social Issues/Humanitarian in 2024. Nine monologs from the anthology were recorded by prominent actors from the US, UK, Scotland, and Kosovo for a series of podcasts titled *A Dictionary of Ukrainian Emotions* that Ukrainska Pravda began streaming in late September 2024.

A somewhat convoluted, but necessary explanation of various project names associated with WUPR is in order due to the confusion that has arisen at times. The support of Arnoult's CITD through the summer of 2024 was provided exclusively to projects involving the Theatre of Playwrights. Early on Arnoult offered this aid under the umbrella of what he called CITD's Ukrainian Initiative, a category that appeared on CITD's website for almost two years. This represented Arnoult's specific and significant contribution to the broader Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings. A few months before Arnoult's death on 30 June 2024, he asked me to continue curating the projects CITD might conduct in and for Ukraine. At that time, we resolved to place all of



Figure 16. Olha Muraviova (left) and Nikita Galkin in *In the Bowels of the Earth* by Olena Hapieveva, directed by Michael Teplitzky. Malenky Teatr, Tel Aviv, Israel, 2022. (Photo by Julia Goland)

CITD's Ukrainian activities under the umbrella of the original name of the Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings, and, consequently, to lend the name of WUPR to all of CITD's future Ukrainian projects. As a project subset for specific activities involving writers' exchanges, LINKAGES: Ukraine was established to parallel CITD's longstanding LINKAGES: Poland and LINKAGES: Hungary. The first LINKAGES: Ukraine event within WUPR was initiated in late July 2024 when two venues in Kharkiv, Ukraine—Teatr na Zhukakh and the Kvitka-Osnovianenko Theatre—presented staged readings of three American plays supplied by Garry Lee Posey's Ensemble Theatre of Chattanooga, Tennessee. A reciprocal event involving streamed audio readings of Anna Halas's *Chronicles* and Dmytro Ternoviy's *On the Eve*, as well as conversations with the two writers in the Ensemble Theatre's Lights Up! Podcast series, were recorded in September 2024, with actual stream dates yet to be determined.

WUPR never was, and was never intended to be, a centralized organization that I could or would control. I, as well as partners Farndon and Arnoult, have always viewed it quite simply as an opportunity for anyone interested in doing so to step up and support Ukraine and Ukrainian writing. This has made it difficult to keep hard statistics on many of our activities; as time went on,

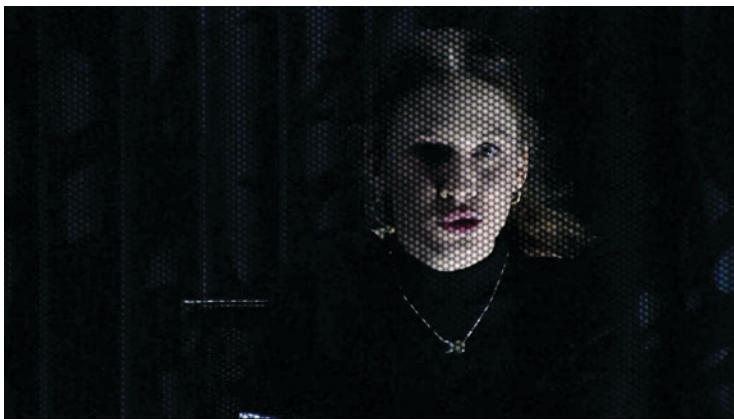


Figure 17. Jana Kovalčíková in *A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War* by Olena Astasieva, dramaturged by Miriam Kičiňová. National Theatre of Slovakia, Bratislava, 2022. (Screenshot of Facebook video by John Freedman; www.facebook.com/zastavme.ich.bratislava/videos/2439634869505165)

the program took on a life of its own. The texts were readily available, the motivation was clearly shared by many, and I increasingly found that writers and theatres and universities were mounting their own projects without contacting me or informing me of their activities. It never was a matter of giving “permission” for anything—aside from extracting the unwavering promise that all noncommercial events must include fundraising activities. It was always a matter of inspiring others to build their own events in ways that suited

them, and did someone good. Many have come to me, wishing to be included in the project, such as the Young Playwrights Ukraine initiative, established by New York-based writer Laura Cahill. Although Cahill began her work before approaching me, I now happily present the 10 young writers she works with as members of WUPR’s team. On the other hand, whenever I run across an initiative that has taken place outside of my influence, I welcome it as proof of WUPR’s extended reach, and flatter myself to consider it a confirmation that the work we all have done continues to find audiences, and to do what we all intended: to affirm the existence, singularity, and power of Ukrainian culture.

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