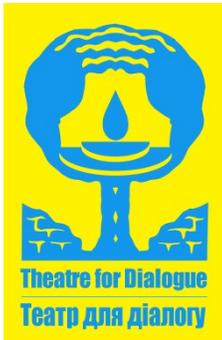


Theatre for Dialogue in Ukraine

Between February 11 and 18, 2014, seven international Theatre of the Oppressed practitioners were invited to visit different parts of Ukraine as part of a locally-led, crowdfunded “Theatre for Dialogue” (TfD) initiative with the aim to promote grassroots dialogue among Ukrainian citizens from different walks of life about the current highly complex, at times contradictory and increasingly violent situation in the country.



Since late November 2013, hundreds of thousands of ordinary Ukrainians have consistently expressed their growing frustration with a national government unwilling to ensure that all Ukrainians, and not just a small business elite and government-apparatshiks, can live a life of dignity and freedom. The original cause for what is commonly known as the “Euromaidan” protest was the failure of president Victor Yanukovich to sign an (admittedly potentially adverse) Association Agreement with the European Union, which has since grown into a full-blown protest movement tired of economic mismanagement, lack of democratic accountability, endemic corruption and selective justice among others.



After the first deadly clashes between protesters and riot police on January 19 and the apparent failure of the national government and political opposition to resolve the stalemate, a group of local civic and human rights activists, all of whom had previous Theatre of the Oppressed experience, decided that it was urgent to address the growing anger and hopelessness among ordinary Ukrainians by creating opportunities for horizontal dialogue via an artistic, creative and embodied response. The Theatre for Dialogue initiative was born.

Concretely, TfD activities were carried out in 5 cities of Ukraine, covering the main geographical regions of the country. A total of six 3-day Theatre of the Oppressed workshops followed by the same number of public Forum Theatre performances brought together hundreds of spect-actors invited to critically reflect on what is happening in the country and try out in action some of their ideas for non-violent change.

Unfortunately, in one region, home base of the Ukrainian president and his entourage, the theatre activities were met with threats, persecution and protests, though luckily everyone involved managed to conclude their participation unharmed. In the other regions, the vast majority of those who took part in the initiative, either as performers or audience, expressed their delight at being involved in a genuinely people's-led dialogue that promoted the voices and perspectives of those hitherto ignored and/or silenced.

Besides, according to a number of workshop participants, Theatre for Dialogue enabled them to find their own role in and contribution to the protest movement. In the words of one of the participants: “I do not see myself with a gun in my hand. And neither can I accept merely providing food or clothing for those protesting out on Maidan (the main square in Ukraine's capital Kyiv, where the protesters have been camping for almost 3 months). For weeks I was looking for a more creative, human way of getting involved. Theatre for Dialogue is exactly what I was searching for.”



Finally, the Theatre for Dialogue initiative set in motion a great desire to continue to use different forms of participatory, interactive theatre in the future. Both in those regions where activities took place as well as in other parts of the country, local activists have already contacted the TfD organizers with the request for further theatrical actions. In short, the buzz generated has been enormous and it now appears possible that TfD will become a major way of involving the people of Ukraine in the creation of a better, more democratic and just Ukraine for all.



For more info: <https://www.facebook.com/theatrefordialogue>

Mourning ceremony on Feb. 21, 2014. Photos provided courtesy of Oksana, Member of the Organizing Committee Theatre for Dialogue/Joker Tsunami.