

# HOOLOGAN AT MYSTETSKYI ARSENAL

A journey through the sunset into night



Theatre director and performance maker Peter Cant (London/Berlin) works internationally, devising interdisciplinary performances which create spaces for encounters between artists, communities and audiences. He is interested in cultural exchange and works predominantly across linguistic, artistic and cultural borders. His UK directing credits include 'Unborn in America' at ROH Linbury Studio and Vault Festival; 'Alexandria' at the Yard Theatre as well as new works for Mahogany Opera Group and the English National Opera's Youth Company. Within his Culture Bridges international mobility grant together with Ukrainian young actors Peter created site-specific performance 'Hooligan' at Mystetskyi Arsenal. The director tells the story of the project.

I began collaborating with a community of young actors in Ukraine in 2016, when I took part in the ETC residency at Gogolfest and codirected with Katharina Schenk (Germany). We kept working together the following year, creating a show, *If You Can't Find a Partner Use a Wooden Chair*, which performed at Gogolfest's 10th anniversary edition. It was inspiring for me, as I loved the actors work and was really interested in the way they were referencing Soviet cinema, surrealism, painting, music, etc. They seemed more open-minded and freer than a lot of actors in the UK.

Following the success of the show in Kyiv, Deutsches Theatre, Berlin and the ETC invited us to develop a new piece in December 2017, *I Tell You We Must Die*. A touring show *Tranzyt* marked the third year of our international collaboration. We took it on tour though Ukraine and then adapted it to the DAKH theatre location to have a series of shows there.

With *Tranzyt* coming to an end, I knew I wanted to try something new, combining my experience in music theatre with my desire to initiate a new project in Kyiv. I had an ambition to go back to the origins of my work in Ukraine which was using large scale factory spaces. I wanted to develop a company from my work with these young actors and to expand the team. And then we found the theme.



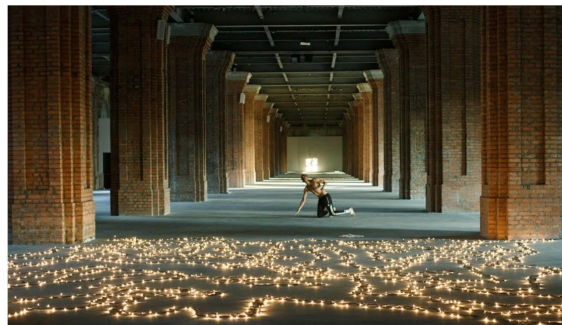


Peter Cant, the director

One of the actors Semen Kyslyi told me about how he had been a football hooligan as a teenage kid. I was shocked as I knew him as this poetical guy, extremely cultural. At the same time as he was fighting opposing teams in forests outside of Kharkiv, he was training at the art school and already being celebrated as a talented young actor. So, he was leading this double life and I became interested in this contradiction as expressive of theatrical themes about acting in everyday life and the masks we wear in society. At the same time I wanted to look into this fight energy, expressed today as the tribalism coming back into politics and populist movements in Europe, and I thought we could explore that through the story of this one young man, who had to construct his enemy every day when he went to fight them in the forest.

The story came up and I was looking for someone to work with and a big space. Then Anna Bubnova from British Council introduced me to Nastya Haishenets, who was running the Theatre Art Laboratory of the Art Arsenal "The Second Floor". I went there in the night time and was immediately inspired. I was also trying to find a myth that could relate to the hooligan story and recollected in my memory the story of *Paradise Lost* by John Milton. Satan is kind of the hero in the piece, he was like a rebel against God, which he sees as a tyrant, but of course he loses, and is thrown down to hell. I saw these layers and parallels with Ukrainian society and revolution and the instinct to rebel, to test your limits. So, I thought immediately of this possible collage of revolutionary angels and hooligans.

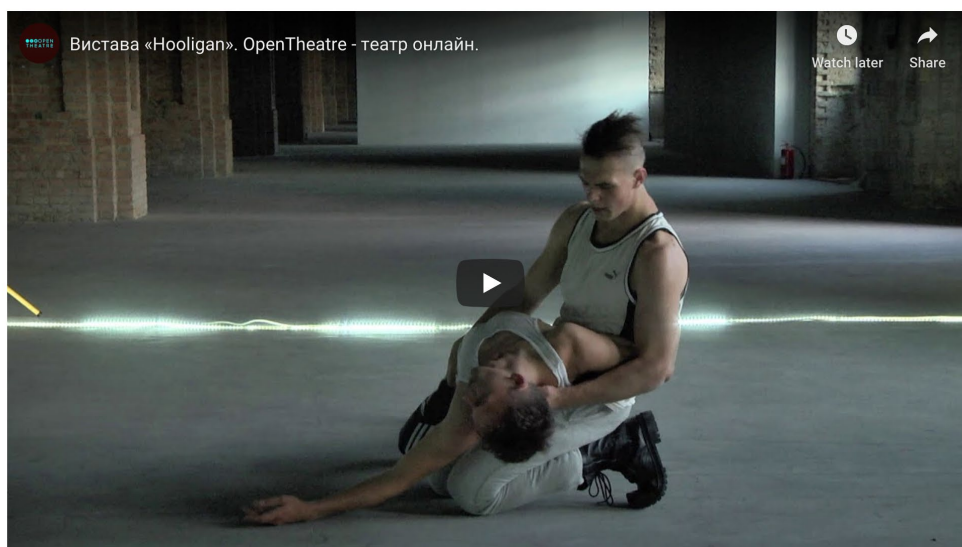
Then I needed support to make that happen and I applied for a Culture Bridges mobility grant. The general idea was that I would come to Ukraine to make a residency for 16 days to create and perform a new work of devised theatre, presented as a work in progress with a dress rehearsal and two performances.



We wanted to create this special experience at Mystetskyi, which would be like a journey for the audience through the sunset into night. We didn't have the script, we just had several ideas and a team of fantastic artists who I trusted completely. I also invited a brilliant composer from the UK, Jessica Maryon-Davies to come and join us for five days, teaching techniques for choral singing, and helping to score the piece with live-singing of Soviet era and contemporary pop songs. So, I was trying to maximise this Culture Bridges support of my mobility in Kyiv to build to a much broader, ambitious project. Sound designer Olesia Onykienko, lighting designer Natalka Perchishena and costume designer Paul Kuraskin also joined the project. A lot of people really believed in this project quite quickly - something about the theme - or perhaps our working process, which aims for a more horizontal structure across the company, in which we can be together and exchange, honestly, as artists.

We worked in collective authorship. We spent three days just singing pop songs, thinking how those could become frames for certain moments in the show. And we made dramaturgy just with the architecture, we were following the natural light. I thought we would create a show lasting one hour, but it expanded with the music and became a 90-minute spectacle. 'Hooligan' has very different music styles and polyphonic effect because of the acoustic of the location. The performance is in Ukrainian, Russian and English. The actors developed a lot of the texts themselves.

On the 16th July we hosted a run-through with invited guests for the first time, performed at sunset, which helped us test the movement of the audience through the space. Over a hundred people came, which was a challenge! We performed the first sharing of the show on 17th July at sunset and last sharing the next day after sundown. I like that the conditions of the show can change, and so the whole atmosphere becomes entirely new every time you play. The Open Theatre team came to the first performance and they live-streamed the show with three cameras.





We were given a small budget from Culture Bridges towards props and costumes. But we wanted as little furniture as possible as the goal was for people to see the space, to feel it and to use their own imaginations for each scene. So, the audience is co-creating the illusion. We put a curtain in the space which cuts out a hole like a golden ratio screen. So, the viewers look into the Mystetskyi Arsenal as if it's a film being projected, or it's a big painting. And then they are invited to step through the curtain and follow the characters. The whole performance is 'promenade' style: immersive and participative. Audience and actors never stay still. It's a journey.

Part of the joy of working in Kyiv has been about playing with language. I have a writing background and it was very liberating for me to let go of the traditional authorship of a new play. We worked with text by collaging it from different sources. We mixed Milton's poem with my interview with Semen about his life, lots of fragments of texts by different authors, pop lyrics from Madonna, etc. In the UK theatre the primary artist is the author, in Germany it's the director. I was interested in how to place text at the same level as music and image. So, the language it's not the only signifier of the meaning in performance. You can dip in and out of the text, just following the images, or the music. There are a lot of different levels on which you can follow and enjoy the show.



Personally, I am inspired by Kyiv and the burgeoning creative scene that is emerging - it is bold, unafraid and adventurous, with a huge array of talented artists - and that's why I wanted to work here, learn from it and why I hope to contribute to it in the long term. However, the immersive, devised and participatory modes of theatre are not very well known in Ukraine. So, I want to encourage young theatre-makers and artists to take up new ways of working in non-traditional spaces, so that they understand that the artistic possibilities are actually greater than in most of Europe, where impressive spaces are now either inaccessible or totally refurbished. This is a great time to innovate, a great time to make new work in Kyiv, the perfect moment to use our technique of taking over space and creating unique performances. The question is how to make funds more accessible to independent theatre makers, and how to develop links with international funds that can participate and support the work as well.

The ability to take my work to Mystetskyi Arsenal, which is internationally recognised platform, helped me tremendously from the career perspective, because it's visible. The collaboration with these artists was really transformative. The free style of working I developed I can take directly back into my current work in the UK, specifically with groups of communities and young people in the opera. I use the same devising techniques that I've grown up here. The way we worked with the light, for example, the way we collaged different texts and so on. And the horizontal structure, to inspire and trust the people you lead.



The project continues. In two weeks, we constructed the project from scratch, so there was no time for what I would call a real rehearsal period. It means the rehearsal and premiere is still to happen. But now we know there is a real demand for it. And we hope to capitalise on the excitement our performances generated. This October we held an event, a celebration of the show, with a presentation, short performance and party. We did this at the underground space at Kurenivka Palace, and a lot of people came, including guests from the Ukrainian Institute, Goethe Institute and British Council. But also, a lot of interested people who hadn't seen the show but had heard about it. We are aiming to rehearse 'Hooligan' in several residency-formats in the spring before hopefully playing a run of shows at the Mystetskyi Arsenal. We would also like to take it on a national and international tour.

We also plan to make contextual program around the work. We are now looking for venues around Ukraine and partners who can support it. We are seeking people to help us plan the way forward for the project and to help us grow as a company in the future.

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