

INTERNATIONAL DIRECTORS SUMMIT THE DRAMA LEAGUE

SESSION 5

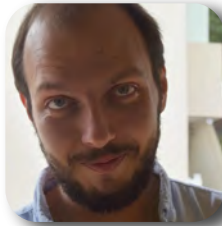
THE REEMERGENCE OF AUTHORITARIANISM

Wednesday February 15th, 2023

SPEAKERS



Maksima Boeva
she/her
🇧🇬 Bulgaria



Stefan Prohorov
he/him
🇧🇬 Bulgaria



Natalie Ester
she/her
🇷🇴 Romania



Dima Levytsky
he/him +
🇺🇦 Ukraine



Avto Diasamidze
he/him +
🇧🇬 Georgia



Anna Smolar
she/her +
🇵🇱 Poland



Mei Ann Teo
she/her
🇺🇸 United States



Lisa Rothe
she/her
🇺🇸 United States



Gabriel Stelian-Shanks
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Gwynn MacDonald
she/her
🇺🇸 United States



Nilan
he/him +
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Kalina Wagenstein
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Maksima Boeva, Stefan Prohorov, Natalie Ester, Dima Levytsky,
Avto Diasamidze, Anna Smolar, Mei Ann Teo, Lisa Rothe
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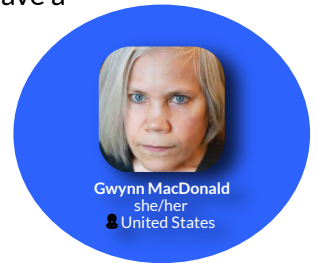
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Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

The expansion of authoritarianism over the last 30 years, and it's quite dramatic, it's quite stark, lot of factors have contributed to this acceleration. The excesses of globalization plus the excesses of capitalism which resulted in some pretty stunning inequity around the world, economic and otherwise. That inequality intersected with the attack on national identity that globalization brings. Also, looking to the United States' use of military force to fight the "war on terror"¹ which became an example and a tool for other countries' authoritarian regimes. Finally technology, that we all use that's meant to connect human beings, in addition, has been a stunning source of misinformation. Authoritarianism² is always dependent on seizing the narrative and dominating it. Laying all that out, that is why we're discussing authoritarianism and the future of directing today. Because our field – which includes all the other narrative based disciplines that use directors to tell stories – we have a role in terms of trying to combat the co-opting of a master narrative or a creation of a master narrative by the strong central powers which characterize too many governments around the world. Any government or entity that threatens basic civil liberties and personal freedoms is an alarm to an artist. What can directors do either in their practice, their choice of materials, in our interactions with the institutions around us, in our communication with audiences, what role do we have as directors, what role does theatre have? How can we encourage globalist thinking in a world that's facing these global challenges?



Anna Smolar | she/her (Poland)

In Poland, we've been living for seven years in this authoritative state. The change of the relationship between politics and cultural institutions and artists was immediate. October 2015 PIS³, the conservative party, won the election. About a month later there was this wave of censorship, which is still happening. Every year we're losing important cultural spaces. I'm talking across all mediums of expression: theatre, visual arts, cinema, etc. When I was thinking recently about those seven years, what I noticed in Poland - and it's very true for me - is a huge tiredness. People are very tired. Many have started to notice this tiredness. It has guided us to look at intimacy as a weapon. This is also what interests me in my practice. To work more in a collective model. Politically we are watching two planets speak different languages to each other. I believe you can relate to this in the U.S. What can we do to bridge the dialogue? still possible? I think theater is a great answer.

Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

The decentralization of power.

Kalina Wagenstein | she/her (Bulgaria)

In Bulgaria, there is a dictatorship around making money. Which creates the idea that the audience can dictate what they want to see versus what they need to see. Which causes a harder fight for directors who would propose something more topical. Not due from political pressure, but from greed of money.

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Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

Money has long been a dictator.



Avto Diasamidze | he/him (Georgia)

The same story in Georgia. The conversations are happening everywhere. I'm in rehearsals right now.

When I'm talking with my actors these conversations come up. I was thinking facing authoritarianism makes the artist's job clearer. It gives you the push to look another way.



Nilan | he/him+ (United States)

I approached this topic in regards to who we serve as artists. In the U.S., the majority of the theaters are coastal. Which leaves out a significant portion of the U.S. Art usually trickles down to these spaces. We become elitists who create stories about how horrible these simpletons are in their assumable conservative bubbles. Now, I'm not saying there aren't amazing artists and institutions in these spaces. I am saying they are heavily underrepresented and under-resourced. I am saying we've been treating them and their audiences like second class citizens. These are the same people, the same audience members, that collected on January 6, 2021⁴ to storm the capital. Bringing diversity, equity, and inclusion to their homes, to their backyards is essential...and dangerous. An artist's call if I've ever



I'm not seeing droves of artists packing up to move to Idaho or Nebraska. I'm thinking these thoughts and calling myself a hypocrite cause I don't want to move. But again, there are artists who have made these fights their jobs. There are artists who see this coming light years before we do in our coastal liberal bubbles. Artists and institutions that need us to help. I also want to point to the dangers of being in that liberal bubble. What conversations have we closed our ears too? What conversations do we need to have with our fellow "brethren"? When did we begin standing on pillars of privilege shouting to the mass? All of this can be addressed in our practice. It's already in mine as I practice as a director/writer. Pushing where and when my work happens. When I take a pay cut or "offer my time" I'm trying to do it in spaces that need me most. Right now, it sits on my practice as conscious work and I hope it becomes subconscious.



Dima Levitskiy | he/him (Ukraine)

I really believe that we as theatre directors can reach our community to work with local communities.

Regarding your question about what changed during this year of full scale invasion. I'm not sure if there are any. All of Ukraine is focused on the war. Our rights are limited. For example, I cannot leave my country because I'm a male. Only if I have some kind of offer for something major, but then again that would be hard to approve. I hope that the victory in Ukraine helps other countries believe in the power of democracy.



Kalina Wagenstein | she/her (Bulgaria)

Dima are any theaters operating during this situation?

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Dima Levitskiy | he/him (Ukraine)

It depends on the city. The east part of Ukraine the theatres are closed. Most of the theatres, at the beginning of the war, were working at the shelters not at the theatres.



Mei Ann Teo | they/them (United States)

I'd like to share about what it's like to work in China and the work that I've done there. I worked there for about 10 years. I haven't been back in the last few years for lots of different reasons. It has gotten increasingly difficult to work there because of the political situation. I started to work in China doing documentary theatre. I was working on this piece where the seat of the Cultural Revolution⁵ took place. This is a place where Mao⁶ wrote The Little Red Book⁷. I was working with people who actually experienced being sent to labor camps. People who never had space to tell their stories. One of the things that I've learned by working there is the importance of the code, that there's so many things that you actually can't just say, so when I went there, in my naivety, I was like, "Oh, we're gonna make documentary theater about Mao!". When we realized this will equal a jail term, for everyone's safety we focused the work on education. We started to ask "what are we taught?" The other story I want to share is when I was commissioned to make a piece for the Beijing Fringe Festival⁸. Where I asked in a place where there is no democracy and there's no real vote, what does it mean for a group of people to be able to determine something together?" So we made a piece called Labyrinth: Defining Humanity. It's a game-like structure. When you enter the game, by giving your ticket, you're accepting the responsibility to define humanity in the space for the next hour and a half. A friend of mine who was the Chief of Operations for Viacom when they brought MTV to China asked about the show. I told her what it was and she said "Mei Ann, you know, this is the moment where the chickens are slaughtered and the monkeys watch." What is that? I'm like, "Oh no...am I the chicken?" And she said, "You have to be extremely careful, because what you're doing is not just affecting the file that you have in China, which you know you have." It's also affecting the festival and the artistic director. It will actually deeply affect what he can do in the future and his wellness and safety." Under those systems there is no improvisation in the same way that I can work here in America. I had to code everything. My friend then advised me to not make anything that creates conversation. Which is the reason why I create. So we have taken whatever we wanted to say and then shift it into what was okay to say and hope that the impulse survives. I'm from Singapore. Censorship in Singapore is also incredibly rigorous. I've also worked there and have gone through sending in the censors. If you change punctuation, you have to send it back in. There can only be a certain percentage of changes that can be made by a certain time. How do you do new work like this?



Mei Ann Teo
she/her
United States



Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

So challenging power in ways that allow the narrative you're putting forward to actually get out there. That's balancing risk and safety in our field.

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Lisa Rothe | she/her (United States)

I'm resonating with what Nilan said a lot. I have spent a lot of time in the Midwest. I'm from the Midwest. I have spent a lot of time doing shows in the Midwest and you know, I have white privilege there, and I am very aware of that. I can pass as straight as a queer person, because everyone processes me that way. I was directing a production of *Fun Home*⁹ at Kansas City Rep¹⁰, and no one usually expected, you know, anything, and so conversations came up around me where people assumed I was one thing, so they felt very open to share some of their views with me, some of their you know, homophobic, racist, transphobic comments. I always have to come out. I don't present in the way that signals their prejudice. That becomes shocking for them because they just felt vulnerable enough to share. I end up becoming a bridge. I'm the bridge in my family as half voted for Trump and the other half for Biden. I feel like I'm constantly in those conversations, and trying to figure out how to navigate them, and how to share different points of view and talk about complexity. We tried to bring a play by A. Ray Pamatmat¹¹ (when I was at the Lark), to Moscow, Russia, and that idea was very supported by the people and theaters that we were working with. Someone at the state department called who had finally read the play. The play was *Edith Them*¹², and the state department was very much like, what are you doing? You cannot do this. To be in the middle of those wright, and then also the sexuality, is complex. Then to I always just had to kind of support and figure out how to works.



This is illegal. It's illegal to even have this play on our computers. conversations with the artists who were in Russia, the play-state department, a play about two young men exploring their start getting personal threats in various places is challenging, so balance risk and safety, and also for the people that I'm trying to keep getting their voices out there, but also to navigate how that

Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

I worked with an illustrator from what was communist Yugoslavia¹³, and he was working in the states here doing the visuals for opinion pieces and editorials of The Wall Street Journal¹⁴, The New York Times, all the large papers. He would do the illustrations and he said the entire time he worked in Yugoslavia, he and his editors knew they had to be smart to get around the censors so the work could be published. What knocked him off his feet here was the feedback he got from his editors in the U.S. saying, "Oh this is great. Your illustration is great, but you have to dumb it down." That was censorship of another kind. When we start to flatten our narratives, when we start to dumb them down as we have, it's a slippery slope. Critical thinking has been in decline in this country for a long time. And I believe that's been a primary factor in how politically unsophisticated, politically naive we have become. We have not had to deal with a rigorous cultural landscape and be challenged.

Natalie Ester | she/her (Romania)

I wasn't born in freedom. I was born into a dictatorship. Into communism. My father passed away, but my mom is still around and I've been raised wishing for freedom more than anything. When I was 14 years of age I witnessed a revolution. I remember my father saving me from bullets. I watched many fight with their hands, skin, and blood. I always wanted to be in the theatre.

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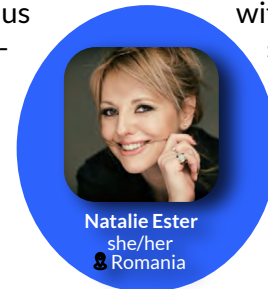
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Natalie Ester | she/her (Romania)

During Ceaușescu's rule, I was thirteen, there was a big contest for poetry. Mei Ann's words reminded me of the impact of the communism festivals. Usually, you were strongly obligated to expose yourself as a lover of communism. I chose a poem, with the support of my mother, for freedom, but Ceaușescu¹⁶ thought it was for him. I won the poetry contest. When they called my name to give me my award they called out "And the winner is Natalia Petra". My name is Natalie Ester. I have nothing to do with Natalia, which is very Romanian, very Slavic, and Petra was the surname my mother had as a little girl. One year later that revolution came. I'm still fighting for freedom. One of my very good friends, a wonderful director from Moscow. We had to shelter him in my house because he was thrown away. He's a criminal in Russia because he stood up against this awful war. He is blamed to be a criminal for being homosexual in 2023. He's blamed for being a criminal for standing against the war, for blaming Putin. In 2018, like five years ago, I almost died fighting for my freedom. They attacked us. I don't know if you know in the U.S. I don't know if it's known around the world. Romania was in danger of losing our European citizenship¹⁷. I spent two awful winters in -20 celsius weather, every single day, fighting for our rights. Fighting for European values: liberty, democracy, and tolerance. They attacked us died. That was the fourth time in my life that I was attacked by power, by leader-orders. I work in the Jewish State Theatre¹⁸. You have no idea how anti-semitism is still around and alive in Romania. Recently, letters were sent to the theatre with threats of killing the actors for being Jewish. This is my work. We cannot live. We cannot without freedom. Dialogue is essential, and of course, not easy.



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Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

Especially when you're, I imagine, when you're also feeling a responsibility to prepare your students for a world that feels more dangerous by the day.



Natalie Ester | she/her (Romania)

My biggest worry today, in truth, is those very intelligent creators whose, sadly enough, morality is bought with money.



Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

I think also what I'm picking up on is again, an emphasis on the power of storytelling. We're trying to use our work strategically to anticipate and even address what's coming down the road in terms of challenges

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Stefan Prohorov | he/him (Bulgaria)

For many years now, I've thought the best thing directors can do is stop being directors. Make directing a profession of the past. I believe directing is a profession of authoritarian essence. Especially in Eastern Europe, where it transcends the cult of personality. So directors are by definition a kind of a replica of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. The only thing that a director can do nowadays is actually help groups and become part of groups, in their capacity of organizing and leading a great process that inevitably leads to some meaningful creation, but this meaningful creation has very little to do with the way we have been perceiving directing in the last decades. I personally do not believe that anyone should care about my personal interpretation of any play or author. I think that we should care about what other people interpret or co-create.



Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

So modeling different forms of power sharing. Being a facilitator may be more defining for directors. No?



Maksima Boeva | she/her (Bulgaria)

I've personally seen theater managers behave in such a way when working with artists and I have too been on the receiving end of it. I've also sadly seen directors behave that way with their cast and crew. I'm afraid the rise of authoritarianism in the world normalizes the fact that the same tactics are used in our day to day, in our homes, our places of work. It's very disheartening to encounter authoritarian behavior in any situation but even more so in creative spaces and it's something that I'm trying to actively fight against and raise awareness about.



Nilan | he/him+ (United States)

Stefan, I respectfully disagree with you. The craft of directing does not usher in the immaculate ruler. Directing isn't about ruling a room. The craft isn't about being the dictator of the idea. Of course, there is evidence of people being bad in rooms. People have been inappropriate in all jobs on this planet. The craft of directing is the bridge between art and audience. A vital role that cares for the experience of the spectator. Thinking of a chain of commands in the theatre in terms of power is a slippery slope. I wager that we think of this chain of commands in terms of responsibility, no, accountability. Directors, and may I add, producers control the behavior and culture of the room. That signals to me a position of responsibility rather than one of power. How to keep a group of people accountable towards the audience and story. As we've talked before, how to keep the theatre accountable to sustainable resources, D.E.I. marketing/practices, ethical funding, and more. Our collective taking the time to excavate the work of the director in today's world has only proven tenfold the essentialness of its role to the theatre community on a global scale. This is why it's important to make our audiences aware of the role of the director. The director has the audience's interest in mind from the ideation, to the conception, to the product. The director also allows other parties in the room to solely work on their contribution to the whole. The consciousness that industry and audience has right now to the multi-facets of change and adaptation to our practice, with respect to all, is dropped at and must be picked up at the feet of the director.



Nilan
he/him +
United States

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Mei Ann Teo | they/them (United States)

I am sharing Jo Friedman's¹⁹ "Tyranny of Structurelessness" essay. I feel that in the last 20 years we've seen exactly what you said Stefan. Tons of people saying fuck this kind of system. What queer and feminist theory actually has found is, is that just because you don't have someone at the top doesn't mean there isn't one at the top. Structurelessness is a lie. I really think about that in terms of coming from Singapore to America. I grew up in the U.S. and there was the lie of democracy. Where I was taught there's three branches of government to check and balance one another. You have all of these systems. It supposedly means that tyranny can never happen. I remember back in Singapore and hearing from Western professors about how dictatorships meant that we had less freedom. The conversation between these two countries tells me a lot about "freedom". I am not free from getting shot in the streets, the elders in the Asian community were shot in that ballroom. What kind of freedom is that? I go back to what our benevolent dictator, Lee Kuan Yew said "It doesn't matter what the structure is. It matters the people who are in that structure and how they're using it." I fought against it so hard. I do actually also believe that structure and form is as important as the content, right? It's not one or the other. It's not a conversation where one structure is better than another. It's what is underneath. Because just as content can be alive, structure and form can be, too.



Natalie Ester | she/her (Romania)

I was just wanting to say that only the fact that we can discuss what is free and what is not in the U.S., that is freedom.



Stefan Prohorov | he/him (Bulgaria)

I think that blaming is the main instrument of repression. Being able to blame isn't necessarily a mark of freedom. I think we should treat blaming and any act of violence with caution. It is a great instrument, inspiring controversy and shaking the very essence of free and open societies. It is to justify violence. Freedom in the 19th century via blood and iron is not the freedom that we need to aspire for today.



Gwynn MacDonald | she/her (United States)

Can there be critique without violence?



Stefan Prohorov | he/him (Bulgaria)

Yes.



Mei Ann Teo | they/them (United States)

Sometimes no critique is violence.



Nilan | he/him+ (United States)

And that's our time. "Sometimes no critique is violence" a thought worthy of suspension. Thank you, everyone!



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¹The war on terror, officially the Global War on Terrorism, is a global counterterrorism military campaign initiated by the United States following the September 11 attacks and is also the most recent global conflict spanning multiple wars.

² Authoritarianism is a political system characterized by the rejection of political plurality, the use of strong central power to preserve the political status quo, and reductions in the rule of law, separation of powers, and democratic voting.

³ Law and Justice (Polish: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [pravo i spravjɔdlivɔst] (listen), PiS) is a right-wing populist and national-conservative political party in Poland.

⁴ January 6 2021, the attack on the U.S. Capitol that disrupted a joint session of the U.S. Congress in the process of affirming the presidential election results.

⁵ The Cultural Revolution, formally known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a sociopolitical movement in the People's Republic of China launched by Mao Zedong in 1966, and lasting until his death in 1976.

⁶ Mao Zedong, also known as Chairman Mao, was a Chinese communist revolutionary who was the founder of the People's Republic of China, which he led as the chairman of the Chinese Communist Party from the establishment of the PRC in 1949 until his death in 1976.

⁷ A book of statements from speeches and writings by Mao Zedong, the former Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, published from 1964 to about 1976 and widely distributed during the Cultural Revolution.

⁸Held since 2008, Beijing Fringe Festival is aimed mainly at young audiences and artists. Its aim is to promote independent, ambitious and innovative theatre in China. The first two editions of the festival presented only Chinese productions, but since 2010 the BIFF has become an international event. It is organized by Beijing Young Dramatists' Association led by Mr. Meng Jinghui, a well-known director and theatre expert.

⁹ Adapted from Alison Bechdel's groundbreaking graphic novel, Fun Home is a refreshingly honest, wholly original musical about seeing your parents through grown-up eyes.

¹⁰Kansas City Repertory Theatre is a professional resident theater company serving the Kansas City metropolitan area, and is the professional theater in residence at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

¹¹A. Rey Pamatmat is a celebrated Filipino-American gay playwright from Port Huron, Michigan.

¹²A play by A. Ray Pamatmat about three kids – Kenny, his sister Edith, and their friend Benji – are all but abandoned on a farm in remote Middle America. With little adult supervision, they feed and care for each other, making up the rules as they go.

¹³Yugoslavia was a country in southeast and central Europe for most of the 20th century.

¹⁴ The Wall Street Journal is an American business-focused international daily newspaper based in New York City with international editions published in Chinese and Japanese.

¹⁵The New York Times, also referred to as the Gray Lady, is a daily newspaper based in New York City with a worldwide readership.

¹⁶Nicolae Ceaușescu was a Romanian communist politician and dictator. He was the general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party from 1965 to 1989, and the second and last communist leader of Romania.

¹⁷Like the Jewish, Roma lost their citizenship under the laws of Nazi Germany before World War II and have endured systematic racism since.

¹⁸Teatrul Evreiesc de Stat in Bucharest, Romania is a theater specializing in Jewish-related plays. It is the oldest Yiddish-language theater with uninterrupted activity in the world. Its contemporary repertoire includes plays by Jewish authors, plays on Jewish topics, and plays in Yiddish.

¹⁹Jo Freeman aka Joreen, is an American feminist, political scientist, writer and attorney.