

GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
EAST VILLAGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview
VIRLANA TKACZ

By Rosamund Johnston
New York, NY
March 17, 2014

Oral History Interview with Virlana Tkacz, March 17, 2014

Narrator	Virlana Tkacz
Birthdate	6/23/1952
Birthplace	Newark, NJ
Narrator Age	61
Interviewer	Rosamund Johnston
Place of Interview	Virlana Tkacz's Apartment on East 11 th Street
Date of Interview	3/17/2014
Duration of Interview	1h 15mins
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Yes
Photo (y/n)	n/a
Format Recorded	.Wav, 48 Khz, 16 Bit
Archival File Names	MZ000007-11
MP3 File Name	Virlana Tkacz 1.mp3, Virlana Tkacz 2.mp3, Virlana Tkacz 3.mp3, Virlana Tkacz 4.mp3, Virlana Tkacz 5.mp3
Order in Oral Histories	RJ 2



Virlana Tkacz in rehearsals in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2010. Photograph by V. Voronin.

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Virlana Tkacz

“In the Sixties, there was a neighborhood with two worlds that walked past each other, that didn’t see each other—totally didn’t see each other. I remember coming to visit when I was young. My grandfather’s sister lived on St. Mark’s. And we were all dressed up, Easter clothes, all this kind of stuff, patent leather shoes. My mother was herding all of us in. And the neighbors across the hall opened the door, and there’s a bunch of kids living there, obviously, like hippies.

I had never seen hippies before. They had a mattress on the floor, and there was like nothing else in the house. And I thought, [whispering] what is that? And they walked around barefoot, had long hair, and I was very interested. [laughs] I had never seen anything like that. Not in Newark—[there were] other things in Newark.

And then I started noticing them on the street—and this is like [19]66, something like that. But the other Ukrainians didn’t see them. They were invisible to them. And same thing—the Ukrainians, the little ladies with their mink [trimmed coats], and the hats, totally invisible to the hippies. They did not see them. [laughs] It’s amazing. The other thing is the old ladies would not see us, the Ukraine children. If you weren’t presentable for the community, if you wore jeans, suddenly you disappeared. They didn’t notice you. It was a very interesting thing.”
(Tkacz pp. 7-8)

“... the Catholic [community] is different from the Orthodox. I mean, that’s like 7th Street and 11th Street. You don’t even know they exist. Plast and CYM [Ukrainian Youth Association] are so different. Then there’s the Ukrainian Communists—I didn’t know about them at all. I knew we were not supposed to go to 4th Street. But why, I didn’t know. But that was because that’s where the Communists were, on 4th Street. And it took me a while—I was working at La MaMa one day, across the street—they didn’t have any signs or anything. It didn’t say ‘Ukraine Communist Party’ or anything. Now they say KGB Club, but that’s a joke. But it’s all real in there. They had a book sale. And I walk in. I couldn’t believe it, there’s Franko and Ukainka Shevchenko. A Ukrainian organization I don’t know about? How could that possibly be true? [laughs] Looking around and then I realize, oh, this is the Communist Party. I only realized that in the Eighties.”

(Tkacz pp. 11-12)

“Ellen started La MaMa in a basement on 9th Street that her Ukrainian landlord [Slywotsky] let her—yeah, I didn’t find out about that until that hour we were talking on TV, the day the Soviet Union [collapsed]. She started telling me all about it. And she had a brother. Now, she calls a lot of people ‘brother’ and ‘children,’ so I’m not sure if it’s really her brother. But that’s okay. That’s part of Ellen’s myth.

He wanted to do a show. He’d written a play and it got ripped off. And she said, “I’ll do your play!” And she rented a basement and started doing plays. And the basement—it was a tiny place. On stage, they either had a bed, or they had a chair. That was it. [laughs] So those are the two possibilities for sets. That’s how big it was. So she did that. They did a lot of scripts and kind of wild stuff, and then they moved to what is now the Ukraine Sports Club upstairs.

Then they finally got La MaMa, the current space, when they got their first Ford Foundation grant. She bought that building. And it had no roof. It had no ceiling. They really totally redid that building...”

(Tkacz pp. 12-13)

“That people live here for a long time, as opposed to move constantly, really makes a big difference. Because there’s a sense of local. I walk down the street, I know half the people I see. I don’t know the NYU students. You see the new ones in September, and they’re all a little chubby. And then, come December, they’re all very sleek girls, the freshmen. It’s a huge difference, very funny [laughs], because the freshmen dorms are right here. And they come in as Jersey girls or wherever they’re from. Don’t ask me, but they become different. In half a year, I tell you.

Most of the other people are here all the time. And you see the same people over and over. There are the same people at the meat store. There are the same people at the coffee shop. I make very little money, but I make every effort to buy local here. Also Greenmarkets [Farmers Markets], et cetera. But more specifically, if I’m going to get a present, I’m going to want to go to one of the little stores here, because I think they should be around, and ‘if we don’t support them, who will’ kind of deal.”

(Tkacz p. 20)

“You know what I miss? I miss Kim’s Video. I really miss it. That’s the one thing I really miss in this neighborhood. It was a video rental place that had really bizarre films, independent movies of the most you-never-heard-of sorts. And it was open until four in the morning. And from midnight to four you met a lot of interesting people there who could tell you everything about this movie, or that and that, or whatever. That I miss. I really miss that, because I used to get really interesting information there. [Now] It’s on the web, but it’s all very impersonal. And maybe Netflix is better at predicting what I’d like, but I’m not sure I want to see what I’d like. I want to see something I’ve never seen before. And it’s only when you meet somebody bizarre like that, and they say, “Oh, you haven’t heard of this? Well, how can you be alive and not have—” And then I think, yeah, yeah, how can I be alive [laughs] and not have heard of this? How can I breathe my next breath without it? And suddenly I’m whipped up into this whole other world. That I miss. And I don’t know where else it happens.

It used to happen at St. Mark’s Bookstore, too, in the middle of the night. They’re not open as late, but at ten o’clock, eleven o’clock, all these strange people—not strange, it’s like other people who can’t sleep or something. Strand [Book Store] has some of that still, where you run into people suddenly and you start talking about poetry, and you find out they’re a major poet. And they’re reading you this and that, and this and that. And I’m like, “Yes, yes.” I like that. I like that kind of community. I don’t know where it happens these days. It must happen somewhere. Maybe it happens in Brooklyn now, I don’t know. And I don’t know where. Maybe it happens on websites. But I feel like I get more and more of what I like, as opposed to what I really never heard of, anymore.”

(Tkacz p. 20)

Summary of Oral History Interview with Virlana Tkacz

- Early Years:
 - Born in Newark, NJ
 - Often visited Ukrainian community around St. Mark's with family (Easter, Advent)
 - Stayed with aunt in the neighborhood when surreptitiously going to rock concerts with friend
 - College in Vermont (Columbia later)
 - Spell in Boston, leaves there to work in theatre (at La MaMa or Genesis)
 - Starts out as production assistant at La Mama

In the Greenwich Village Neighborhood:

- Lives first on First Ave. between 8th & 9th
 - Leaves this apartment when windows fall out (truck falls into hole created by subway construction)
 - New apartment (306 E 11th St) in 1974 – where Tkacz lives to this day
 - Ukrainian landlord
 - Heroin addicts in hallways
 - Actors in her productions had a key in order to bathe/wash makeup off between acts
- La MaMa/ Yara Arts Group
 - Ellen Stewart (head) asks Tkacz to create own show 1990
 - Creation of Tkacz's theatre group Yara
 - Trip to Ukraine with Yara production at the time of the Soviet Union's dissolution (1991)
 - *A Light from the East* first production
 - Works with students who have just graduated from NYU, Julliard etc.
 - Discusses change in theatre from the 1980s to the present (suggests less technical elements used/expected in the past)
 - Important to Tkacz to draw in more than Ukrainian faithful audiences (through news reports and contextualizing play with talk at the beginning)
 - Has traveled to Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Ukraine to research/perform with group
- Ukrainian Community:
 - Says not one but several groups (Catholic, Orthodox, Communist)
 - Suggests lack of interaction between Ukrainian old guard and hippies in the neighborhood (1970s)
 - Former member of Plast group (says Newark branch better than New York ones...)
 - Organizes midsummer festival (Kupala) at the Ukraine Sports Club
 - Put on shows at the Ukrainian Museum (E 6th St.)
 - Attending demonstrations regarding political situation in Ukraine (current)

- Notable Locations:
 - Local stores – mentions defunct Kim’s Video, St. Mark’s Bookstore
 - Theatres – La MaMa, Genesis, ‘Bowery Poetry Project,’ which Yara took to Lviv
 - Fillmore East (where Tkacz saw concerts unbeknownst to parents...)
 - Ukrainian Community establishments: KGB Bar (Communist headquarters), Ukraine Sports Club, Ukrainian Bank, CYM

- Village History:
 - Halloween Parade Organized with Ralph Lee
 - Discusses heroine in the Village (1970s) and methadone clinics
 - Discusses subway construction that led to her windows falling out
 - Says avant-garde theatre has been priced out of the neighborhood

- Current Day:
 - Translating the work of Serhiy Zhadan from Ukrainian for a project called *Underground Dreams* – plans to take this to Donetsk
 - Attending demonstrations about Ukrainian current events (planning exhibit of artist Waldemont Klyuzko’s political posters somewhere in the city)

General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

GVSHP began the Greenwich Village Oral History Project in 2013. The GVSHP Greenwich Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

Oral History Interview Transcript

Johnston: We are now officially recording. I should start by saying that this is Rosamund Johnston, or Rosie Johnston, interviewing for the Greenwich Village Oral History Project. The date is March the 17th, [2014], and we're on 306 East 11th Street.

Tkacz: Yes.

Johnston: So first of all, can you please introduce yourself?

Tkacz: My name is Virlana Tkacz. Most people call me Virlana Tkacz [different pronunciation], or something like that. [laughs] And I don't get too upset about it. It's an interesting name. Virlana means 'young eagle.' And my grandfather named me. He found it in some old archive—somebody left something to his daughter, Virlana. And he thought it was such a cool name. He mentioned it to his cousin, and she was a big feminist. And she insisted that I be named Virlana. And Tkacz is my father's name, and that means 'weaver.' Young eagle weaver. [laughs]

Johnston: You were born here in the United States, despite having a very Ukrainian-sounding name, right?

Tkacz: Yeah, in Newark, New Jersey. And I've lived most of my life in New York and Newark. And I went to school in Vermont for some time.

Johnston: Okay, so I'm going to start with a very open question, answer it how you will—and we can certainly come back to it—which is, can you tell me a little bit about your arts group? What it is? When did it come about?

Tkacz: Sure, sure. Yara [Arts Group] is a company we started in 1990, and it's a resident company at La MaMa [Experimental Theater]. And it started, as everything in life, by chance. Because I had been working at La MaMa for a while, doing Ping Chong, who's a Chinese American director, or Amiri Baraka, African American, or Peter Brook or Tadeusz Kantor. I worked for everybody. I was like the go-to person for a while, in terms of production management, at La MaMa. And I also worked a lot with George Ferencz, and he's the guy I came in [to La MaMa] with. But actually I was at La MaMa way before that, when I was still a kid carrying coffee and ringing a bell. This was my big job in a show, and that was at the top of

my résumé, was ‘Production Assistant at La MaMa.’ And I thought that’s the coolest credit you could possibly have. [laughs] And what I did was ring a bell. And then mostly I worked at St. Mark’s [Church in-the-Bowery], at Theater Genesis, and I also carried coffee, and I also rang several bells. [laughs] You know, that’s usually what you start off with, I guess? I didn’t realize that I had a bell-ringing career, [laughs] but there you go.

Anyway, so in 1989 I knew Ellen Stewart really well, because I’d been there for eight, nine years already doing various things. And I had done several Native American pieces. They loved the fact that my name was ‘young eagle weaver,’ and they would write the translation of my name the way they write the translation of their own names. So people actually started assuming I was Native American, you know, because, hey, a lot of people were Native American don’t look very much different from me. And I had done one show that had gotten some really nice reviews, and once you get something, and then everything is the same after that. Then I did a Polish play, because this woman asked me to.

And then I ran into Ellen. I had just been to Harvard [University] to do a workshop with some Ukrainian poems. And she said to me, “Virlana, what are you going to do this year?” I said I didn’t know. And she said, “What would you really like to do?” And I said, “Oh, I’d like to do some Ukraine poetry.” And I don’t know why I said it. It was like the devil made me do it. [laughs] I was like, I had not thought of it a minute before that, you know? It’s not like it was hankering or anything like that. I don’t have those kinds of hankerings, usually. [laughs] They just happen to me.

And then, and especially with Ellen, lots of things would happen. And she said, “Oh, great, finally!” And she pulls out this little composition notebook with the dates, and she goes, “So, how about March 9th?” And I remember -- why, because it’s the birthday of [Taras] Shevchenko. How could you not know? So I thought, oh my god, how did she know? But she didn’t. It was, like, totally random. And she said, “So what’s the name of the show?” Well, I hadn’t thought of it. I didn’t have a name for it. But I knew if I didn’t say something, I wouldn’t have a show. So I just opened my mouth, I figured something’s going to come out, and it was “*A Light From The East.*” [00:05:27]

Now, why I said that, there was no conscious process. [laughs] And she wrote it down and closed her book. And that’s how I got my first show. That eventually became Yara. And then I went home and was like, why did I do that? And then I thought, oh, March 9th. Maybe that’s a

sign I should read Shevchenko.” I’d never read him before. So I got the big book out, this was like Friday or something, and by Monday I had read the whole thing. And I only liked three poems. And I thought, oh, this is a disaster! [laughs] You know, what am I going to do?

In the meantime, I was doing something with a bunch of NYU [New York University] students also, who’d been in my Polish play and now wanted to do something else. And we couldn’t find a piece for seven young people. I mean it, and I really wanted to keep that group together. I thought they were really cool and everything. And I had worked for Ping Chong, and I saw how he made his pieces. And I thought, that’s easy, I could do that, too. You know, when you’re young, you think of those kinds of things. And so I said, “Okay, guys, you’re all going to go home, and you’re going to write me what you want to do in theater. And then I’ll just edit it, and then we’ll have a show.” Simple, right?

So they went home and they were writing all this stuff. They’d bring me these five-page monologues and all this kind of stuff, and I’m reading it and reading it. And I’m thinking, you know what, I’ve read all this somewhere before. I’m getting really pissed off, because here I’m giving them this opportunity of a lifetime, and they’re cheating, they’re [laughs] copying it from something. And then I realized they weren’t. Because I realized what this reminded me of. And what it reminded me of was the same kind of things that the actors of Les Kurbas, who ran his theater in Kiev in 1919, and I had written my thesis at Columbia [University] about—they wrote the same kind of stuff. And I thought, this is interesting. So I mentioned it to Wanda Phipps, who was there yesterday. She’s an African American poet who works with me, and she thought it was really cool, too. She said, “Well, we should make a piece, put what they’re writing today and what those guys wrote, and put it together.” And I thought, this is a brilliant idea. Okay, great, let’s do it.

But that meant I had to translate everything, because [laughs] nothing was in English. So for somebody to have a couple sentences, we’d have to translate articles and articles and articles. But I started doing it. And I had done some of it for my thesis, but most of it is just like—it’s enough to make you crazy. [laughs] But then, as I am reading all this stuff over again, I notice one of the two of the poems I liked, Kurbas had staged with his actors. I hadn’t really paid attention to that part that much. I mean I knew he did some Shevchenko, but it didn’t mean much to me, since I just hadn’t read it. Or I read it, and then I forgot about it. And I thought, ah, we should stick some Shevchenko poems in here. And so I started looking for translations. And they

were terrible. [laughs] And Wanda would have these laughs fits. So I thought, okay. She said, “Listen, you can do better than that.” So we started working on translations together. That was in [19]89. The first poem in this piece is a poem we did in that piece, and it’s the first translation we ever did. It’s numbered ‘She 1.’ [laughs] It actually would [be in] this piece.

Johnston: So does Yara find itself very often sort of reconsidering the same themes? I mean, are there some things that feel particularly interesting for you?

Tkacz: It comes up once in a while, but very rarely. Actually, what I love about theater is the fact that you’re constantly learning new worlds. And I think I need to take a little pause and just skim the soup. [00:10:10]

Johnston: All right.

Tkacz: Can I do that?

Johnston: You can.

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF SECOND]

Johnston: Okay, so you were saying that there are some things that do come up, but that theater generally is a place that you can learn a lot, and that you are always doing new stuff.

Tkacz: Yeah, I’m always interested in the research end of it, also. We don’t really do plays at all. What we do is we research a topic, and then do bits and fragments of things. [Showing photograph] So this was our first piece that we wound up going, ‘this is the director, and this guy is one of the original cast members from New York, and she is from Ukraine. And this is in Ukraine the day the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.’ So there are a lot of stories to tell around that piece, because eventually what happened is we made this piece at La MaMa, first at the First Street Workshop and then at La MaMa in November, and somebody came to see this show.

I had written to everybody [in Ukraine] many times about coming to see what I was doing, you know, people in Kiev. But, Soviet Union, nobody even wrote back. And then somebody was there. They brought an invitation; they asked me to come. I came two weeks later to take a look because I’d never been to Ukraine. And it was a terrible time in Ukraine. It was

like December [19]90. No, [Eduard] Shevardnadze was saying—or not Shevardnadze. What was it? I forgot about what he was saying.¹

When I was there in January there was shooting in Lithuania and all that. Yeah, it was bad times. Anyway, I also understood [something important], duh, nobody speaks English here. I can't do a play about Kurbas in English. So I decide we do a co-production. And so they give [us] all these old actors. And, like, "No," because they're famous. [But] they want to work in America, basically. That's all they want. So I said, "No, nobody over twenty-five in our show." Because [my actors] were all twenty-five. They were all in school still. Not in school—they'd just finished. And I wound up going next summer. We did workshops, we found seven more, and so it was like everybody had a partner they could talk to. And it was incredible. Somebody [Amy Groyspell] made a movie about that, one of our people. And I can lend it to you if you want to watch it. It's really cool.

Johnston: I'd love to see it.

Tkacz: And it's about a bunch of kids from the East Village, going— I was the only bilingual— oh, there were two [others]. There was a Canadian guy who was my composer, and there was one of the girls. Two of the girls in Ukraine, one who's in the show and one who was like a critic attached to our show, spoke English. That's it. There were like forty people. And we're there when the Soviet Union collapses. It was pretty intense. And in our show, about ten times it says, "A new government has taken our town," because it's about 1919 and the constant revolution. So people would get up and scream. And it was really amazing. So everybody knows about our show who was around then, because we were on TV.

Ellen Stewart then got on and talked. They had an interview with her, and it was the day of the coup. And so *Swan Lake* is on channel one and Ellen Stewart is on channel two for hours [laughs], talking about experimental theater in the East Village. I learned so much about it [then], to translate for her [laughs], because they wouldn't let us go. So people know about us because of that. But we also became a company because of that, because it was such an incredible experience.

And so the next piece we did was about Chernobyl[Chornobyl]. That was okay. Third piece we did was really important. I don't know if I have a picture here from it, but it was called

¹V.K. notes on June 6, 2015 that "there was going to be a coup d'etat."

Blind Sight, and it was about this blind guy from Kiev who went to Japan and became the first foreign writer to write in Japanese and be published in Japanese. And this is 1916. It's a totally unlikely story, but he wrote in Esperanto, also. And it's this amazing story. Anyway, we did that, and we developed this pattern of making a workshop here, then doing a show, either here or first going to Ukraine and then making the show here. It depended which one. So that was our first four shows.

Then we did the only play we ever did. But we also just did very few scenes from it. It was called *The Forest Song*. We had won a translation prize. It was, again, one of these things we had applied for without much thinking. You had to submit ten pages, and we had ten pages. We didn't even do the rest. We hadn't even read the rest. [laughs] You know how it is. [We] Had deadlines and everything, and suddenly we got the prize. It was like, 'oh my god, we got to finish it now!' Anyway, it turned out to be an interesting [play] about trees talking, and grass, and a really beautiful piece from 1911. So here's the field begging her not to reap them. [00:05:27]

I get to work with really great talents here, because people come out of school, out of Columbia, out of NYU, out of Juilliard [the Juilliard School], and very often wind up with me as their first project. So you get to work with some of the best people. I have a couple right now who are just amazing. But I'm kind of holding my breath, [laughs] you know? Like Jeremy Tardy, the guy who did the Shakespeare stuff. Isn't he fabulous? But I'm sure he's going to be in California pretty soon, [laughs] because it's just financially unfeasible for them.

Johnston: That raises a really interesting question, which is, it sounds like you are a veteran in the East Village's alternative theater scene. Can you tell me a little bit about how you've seen it change over your career here?

Tkacz: Well, there have been huge changes. There was a lot more of it, somehow, I think, in the East Village. Now there's more of it in other boroughs, I think, the really innovative and young stuff. Because people can't afford to do it here, you know? I mean, it's funny, but the people who are the avant-garde, that generation is maybe ten years older than me. They're still the young whatever, and they're already dying. They're the people who get the grants, the big ones. So there is that.

And there aren't that many places, also, I think. Because it used to be easier to do it in a café and everything else. Again, I just was a little bit too young for that, but they had federal

programs that paid artists to work. Not much, like fifty bucks, but hey, that's more than we got. So you have to kind of figure out how to survive. And surviving's a lot tougher now, I think.

The other thing is, I think we were happy with less, in a funny way. I mean, nobody had cell phones or computers, and all that stuff that costs a lot of money on a monthly basis. My monthly bill was rent. That was it. Maybe ConEd [ConEdison of New York], but we tried to keep the lights off daily. [laughs] So that's all you had to meet in terms of payments. I'm going to have to take a look at the soup again.

Johnston: All right, let me press pause.

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF THIRD]

Johnston: All right, we are recording again. You were telling me a little bit about perhaps how the theater scene here has changed, and you were saying maybe people are more demanding in a way, now, in terms of what they need and want in order to do theater and just live. So more about cell phones, computers, et cetera, you were saying.

Tkacz: And that winds up with big bills, eventually.

Johnston: Yes. And I mean, can you tell me a little bit what it was like back in the day when you were making coffee and ringing bells? Where were you doing this? What did it look like, and did it look the same as today or—

Tkacz: On some level. You know, Sam Shepard was working at Theater Genesis. They were totally cool guys. I'm sure sixteen-year-olds think they're totally cool guys [laughs] in today's theater too. Neighborhood's really different. It was a really rough neighborhood then. In the Sixties, there was a neighborhood with two worlds that walked past each other, that didn't see each other—totally didn't see each other. I remember coming to visit when I was young. My grandfather's sister lived on St. Mark's. And we were all dressed up, Easter clothes, all this kind of stuff, patent leather shoes. My mother was herding all of us in. And the neighbors across the hall opened the door, and there's a bunch of kids living there, obviously, like hippies.

I had never seen hippies before. They had a mattress on the floor, and there was like nothing else in the house. And I thought, [whispering] what is that? And they walked around

barefoot, had long hair, and I was very interested. [laughs] I had never seen anything like that. Not in Newark—[there were] other things in Newark.

And then I started noticing them on the street—and this is like [19]66, something like that. But the other Ukrainians didn't see them. They were invisible to them. And same thing—the Ukrainians, the little ladies with their mink [trimmed coats], and the hats, totally invisible to the hippies. They did not see them. [laughs] It's amazing. The other thing is the old ladies would not see us, the Ukraine children. If you weren't presentable for the community, if you wore jeans, suddenly you disappeared. They didn't notice you. It was a very interesting thing.

Anyway, but then heroin hit here. And that was terrible. That was horrendous. Most methadone clinics in New York were here between 11th and 14th. All those restaurants you can't afford to eat in? [laughs] They used to be methadone clinics. Every junkie in town was here. It was pretty hair-raising. And the neighborhood started getting really worse, and worse, and worse. And that's when I moved back, because I went to college in Vermont. [So] I came back. I wanted my own apartment. I was going to work in theater.

I had a really great place. We were living in Boston and everything else. And I decided, no, it'd never work in theater if I was going to be there. So I really wanted to work at La MaMa or Genesis—I don't even know if I knew yet, but I wanted to be here. And I first lived on First Avenue. They were digging up First Avenue for the Second Avenue subway. Who knows why? But we had a very nice apartment between 8th and 9th Street, on the top floor of a floor-through. It was one of those really great places. And it was I, and my roommate was a filmmaker, Melasia. We got the place I guess in August or September, something like that, and in October, a truck came down the street and fell in [the hole]. They had put the plates [over it] and somehow it got moved or something, and the truck fell in. I mean, I don't think anything major happened to him, but what it did [was] it shook the building. And all the windows in the apartment fell out. I slept right under the window. I was really lucky they fell out, because in some places they fell in. And we had a wind tunnel in our house. [laughs] I mean, all the windows like [makes explosion sound]. And we tried to get the landlord to put them in, but he obviously wanted us out, because then he could raise the rent again. We could've fought him in court, but I was working in theater, she was making movies. I didn't have time to do this. I didn't know how to do this. [00:05:43]

So I went to the Ukrainian bank, and I saw this little note. And it said they had an apartment for rent. And the only thing I wanted to know when I came to see this place was: was it on a top or a bottom floor? Because top floor, you don't get heat. Bottom floors are really hot. I wanted a middle floor apartment. And he said he had a middle floor apartment. I said, "Okay." I came over, and he was a really nice guy, I must say. Our original landlord bought the building part by part from this old lady who lived downstairs. And he was a factory worker. Really nice people. Anyway, and we looked around, we were like, hmm, we're thinking, maybe it's too expensive. We didn't even ask about rent yet. And I looked at the refrigerator, and there's this old refrigerator. We didn't even notice the tub in the kitchen. It's just like, how stupid we were. And he said, "Okay, I'll get you a new refrigerator and lower the rent by \$5 a month." And it was like a hundred something dollars. That's when we found out. And we were like, "Okay!" And he said, "When are you going to move in?" And I said, "Tomorrow!" He said, "What? I got to paint the place." I said, "Okay, [laughs] day after tomorrow." [laughs] It was really cold in the other place!

Johnston: So which year was this that you moved in here?

Tkacz: [19]74. And it was November, and he didn't even charge us for that half-month or something. Turned out he was really glad we were Ukrainian. We were girls, and we didn't look like junkies. And we were the only people under seventy-five in the building. Then they didn't have locked [front] doors. Like the front hallways, usually the doors were not locked. That's a new thing. It really started around then. And so you'd have these junkies in our hallway constantly, and in the bathrooms. Ay, that was something. Usually, they're not threatening, but it's just scary, you know. And every once in a while you'd see a friend or something—it's like, oh my god. Or having to move somebody so you can get into your doorway. That was nerve-racking, but I didn't think about it too much. I was really happy I lived down the street from Genesis.

Oh, the other thing that happened [was] Theater Genesis, they had no place to change. Like if we did a show that had a lot of make-up or something like this, you couldn't wash up there. The sink was inadequate. So people would come over to my house to take baths. And they'd do it [laughs] in the middle of a show! [laughs] So everybody had a key to my place. So I

was assistant director in a couple of pieces there and assistant to the assistant stage manager, all that kind of stuff.

Johnston: So you said something that was really interesting, which was when you were younger especially, and you came into this part of town, it was two worlds. Can you tell me a little bit about those two worlds? And specifically the Ukrainian one that, as a child, it sounds like you were involved in, right?

Tkacz: Yeah.

Johnston: What was the situation with the Ukrainian community here then?

Tkacz: Well, I grew up in Newark, really. But it was a very similar community, and a lot of crossover. Like I was in Plast, and of course New York was a big group. They had three groups of Plast girls, like the teenagers, and we had two. And they were our main competition in any event. So that was what you had to do. Ukrainians kept their kids really busy, man. We had music school one night. We had dancing. I went to ballet. I didn't go to Ukrainian dancing. And the next day you'd have embroidery. Then you'd have Plast. Then you had something else, crafts, and then Saturday you had a whole day of extra schoolwork. So you didn't have time to screw around, [laughs] basically. We were all so busy. [00:10:32]

Johnston: But you came in here to visit family. You had some family living in this part?

Tkacz: Yeah, St. Mark's. I had an aunt who, I told you, she lived across the street from these hippies. And she eventually was where I stayed a lot, because I'd kind of abscond from the house. I mean, I didn't really run away, because I went to visit my aunt. But my aunt did not have a phone. This was the reason I went to visit her. [laughs] For instance, my cousin from Boston, who's very cool, too, we'd go to Fillmore East to a Jimi Hendrix concert, or Janis Joplin, where you couldn't come back to New Jersey. There was no transportation that late, usually, and it was scary outside. But you weren't going to tell your parents. They were going to say no. So we'd say, "Oh, we're going to visit my aunt." And then you show up at her house [at] four o'clock in the morning. But she was kind of senile, and so you could bring cookies and say, "Oh, Tsotsia, how come you're asleep?" [laughs] I know. We were terrible. [laughs] But it didn't

matter to her, really. She'd be very happy to see you. She'd make you coffee. She'd say, "What meal would you like?" [laughs] I know, I know. We were terrible.

Johnston: And so you came here for Easter, as well.

Tkacz: For Easter that I was telling you about before. See, Newark community was on the new calendar, because they're part of Philadelphia diocese. And New York and Stamford and everything north is on the old. We'd do both. That's what everyone does in Ukraine communities; they do both holidays. So we'd have two Christmases, two Easters. Some years it's really bad, you only have one when they coincide. [But when there's two] you get lots of parties.

Johnston: I mean, ritual is the wrong word. But what would you do when you came into this part of town for Easter, or how was it celebrated? Or Christmas?

Tkacz: The big deal was that they'd have dancing in the street [for Easter]. And you'd come and check out what the New York group was doing. We in Newark had a much better [group], I tell you, really significantly better. And not only that, we'd practice. We'd do this stuff. When I went to Ukraine I eventually went to the villages, I realized I knew a lot more Easter dancing than all the old ladies who are supposedly the big—I interviewed some of them, and I realized, I know a lot more about this than they do. [laughs] Because I've done it all my life.

Johnston: It is a very traditional community? Do you think there have been, there's a big emphasis upon—

Tkacz: Well, I don't think there's one Ukraine community. There's about ten.

Johnston: [laughs] Okay.

Tkacz: No, seriously, because the Catholic one is different from the Orthodox. I mean, that's like 7th Street and 11th Street. You don't even know they exist. Plast and CYM [Ukrainian Youth Association] are so different. Then there's the Ukrainian Communists—I didn't know about them at all. I knew we were not supposed to go to 4th Street. But why, I didn't know. But that was because that's where the Communists were, on 4th Street. And it took me a while—I was working at La MaMa one day, across the street—they didn't have any signs or anything. It didn't say 'Ukraine Communist Party' or anything. Now they say KGB Club, but that's a joke. But it's

all real in there. They had a book sale. And I walk in. I couldn't believe it, there's Franko and Ukainka Shevchenko. A Ukrainian organization I don't know about? How could that possibly be true? [laughs] Looking around and then I realize, oh, this is the Communist Party. I only realized that in the Eighties. [00:15:04]

Johnston: So lots of questions. I would be really keen to hear a little bit about La MaMa and Ellen Stewart and the earlier days. It sounds like you were involved from really fairly early on, right?

Tkacz: No, I came in for the twentieth anniversary. I did a couple things earlier, but we did our first show there as part of the twentieth anniversary. And now it's the fifty-second anniversary, so I've been there a while. Anyway, I worked on an Amiri Baraka opera, *Money*, a jazz opera. And at the end there's a scene in it that happened in free South Africa. And I remember thinking, wow, that's never going to happen. You know what I mean? Who ever would have thought the Soviet Union was going to collapse? It's just like, wow! [laughs]

Johnston: You know that I'm fairly recent to the neighborhood. It sounds like La MaMa has this real big legacy. But what was it conceived to do in the early days, and has its aim changed? And have you witnessed this?

Tkacz: Well, I know a lot about La MaMa because I was interested in history, also. But Ellen started La MaMa in a basement on 9th Street that her Ukrainian landlord [Slywotsky] let her—yeah, I didn't find out about that until that hour we were talking on TV, the day the Soviet Union [collapsed]. She started telling me all about it. And she had a brother. Now, she calls a lot of people 'brother' and 'children,' so I'm not sure if it's really her brother. But that's okay. That's part of Ellen's myth.

He wanted to do a show. He'd written a play and it got ripped off. And she said, "I'll do your play!" And she rented a basement and started doing plays. And the basement—it was a tiny place. On stage, they either had a bed, or they had a chair. That was it. [laughs] So those are the two possibilities for sets. That's how big it was. So she did that. They did a lot of scripts and kind of wild stuff, and then they moved to what is now the Ukraine Sports Club upstairs.

Then they finally got La MaMa, the current space, when they got their first Ford Foundation grant. She bought that building. And it had no roof. It had no ceiling. They really

totally redid that building. I don't know when that was, exactly. You know Ozzie Rodriguez at the La MaMa archive? You should go talk to him. He does a great tour, and he'll give you a lot of insight into La MaMa in a big way. And that's something he loves to do. So you should definitely do that, because that's one of the organizations that could really talk to the space and everything.

Going back to this, then I had Nina Matviyenko, a famous folk singer, and I had her sing with—you know Yunjin Kim? She's in *Lost*. It's a famous TV show. I tell you, with obviously non-Ukraine speakers, African American, Chinese, Koreans and everything. And people got used to that, to me doing that. I had to, at first, really address the issue, why we're doing it.

Johnston: How did you address that?

Tkacz: I talked before the show. I'd say, "This is why we're doing it," or I'd write an article for the Ukrainian newspaper saying, "It makes our topics bigger and more open to everybody. And also, that's why we do it in English, or bilingually, so that other people can understand."

And so my first five pieces were involved with Ukrainian material. And then, one day, I was with Ellen, with this show in Ukraine. So we had gone to Ukraine three or four times already. We had big exchanges. We brought people here and everything else. And I had an argument with somebody in Ukraine. It's like not unusual to have an argument during a show. I was sitting outside. I don't like to yell, so I was steaming. Ellen comes up to me and goes, "Virlana, your big show's going to be in Mongolia." And I thought, "Wow. I better take her home." [laughs] I mean, what would you think if somebody came and told you that? Why would I want to go to Mongolia? [00:20:15]

But sure enough, in nine months I was in Buryatia, which is northern Mongolia in the Soviet Union. I had never heard of these places or anything before. And she did nothing to make me go, except say that. I did it all myself. [laughs]

Then my next few pieces—this one, for instance, is [*Virtual Souls*, in it there are] five young Americans on the internet. This is the beginning of the Internet, 1995. I knew a lot of people involved in that. It's kind of about Tim Berners-Lee and all those guys. And they're looking for truth and everything else. Everybody's talking through a computer instead of talking to each other. Every time they mention something, [the background] is all changing—but

computers were so slow then, you couldn't do that. We had to use slides to fake it, and everybody would be like, "Oh, so high tech." [laughs]

And then this guy's looking for *Buryat Chronicles*, and keeps on looking, looking, looking, and suddenly he finds something. He opens up, and this opens up, and in the deep space there are two guys from Buryatia throat singing. We brought the first throat singers here. It was really incredible. And they're singing about the beginning of the world. And we went to Buryatia and met them. I mean, this long story how I did that. It was like meeting ourselves on the other end of the world. It was very cool.

Then next, we got a grant from the Rockefeller [Foundation] to go out there and record more, because we had such a hit with the show, in which all these people fall into this world, and they have to kind of figure out what their story is. So then we went in to record. We went to Siberia. We recorded in tiny villages. We recorded grandmas, and we made a CD. And we recorded stories, and we recorded shamans. And [for] seven years I went. It was really incredible. I wrote this book about it. And then sometimes it was funny shows. Sometimes, like this one, they said, "Oh, we're tired of being the holy Buryats." [laughs] We'd joke around about this stuff.

So we did this very funny piece about a wedding, where the ghosts come, and Gogol Bordello, Eugene [Hütz]—they were friends. We were all really good friends then, and this was their first paid job. They were a band in my show [laughs]. And then we started doing Ukrainian stuff, too, because some of the people from my very first piece, plus Eugene, they were singing together. And I wanted to do a winter show. And we did this. [phone rings]

[END OF THIRD AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF FOURTH]

Johnston: Okay. So we're recording again, this all sounds good? So you were telling me, after you did some work with Eugene Hütz and Gogol Bordello, you decided to do another Ukrainian play, a winter play, you said.

Tkacz: Yeah, they were in it too, Mariana Sadovska. And we did stuff with three scientists. It's always three scientists, looking at the beginning of the sun. And we got slides. I read about it in the *New York Times*. This laboratory, they found this meteorite, they opened it, and it was from the minute that the sun was born. And there were water crystals in there, salt crystals. They sent us slides, or pictures of them. It was very cool. So they're all so busy being scientists, and into

their lab comes the sun. And she says, “I need a ritual to be reborn again.” They say, “Get outta here, you’re not the sun.” And she goes [ray sound effect] and she turns them into the characters in a ritual, like the goat and Malanka [Ukrainian Christmas folk tradition, the Koza]. And then they have to do this ritual. It was a lot of fun [laughs]. It was pretty funny. The head of the lab has turned into this goat, and she has to do the goat dance. And she dies. They’re all like, “Oh my god, what is going on?” But it’s about ritual and scientific worlds clashing. Respect to both, you know? That’s what I’m interested in, is when worlds collide like that.

And then I did a Ukrainian poem, ‘Swan,’ that was very beautiful. And then we started going to Mongolia. Well, this play, we got a grant to go to Mongolia to do it, the third Mongolian-language theater festival. Even though [only] three of us spoke Buryat. The rest of us spoke gibberish, basically, or English. We were supposed to open the play September 15th, and 9/11 happened.

So suddenly I was in Mongolia all by myself, with my Buryat friends. They were like, “Oh well, it’s the end of the world. What do you really want to do for the rest of your life?” [laughs] And we sat around, and a couple of the guys said that they wanted to see where Genghis Khan was buried. I said, “Oh cool, let’s go.” And it’s really to the other end of Mongolia, like, Dashbalbar and Khenti. Really far away. There’s these little red lines on the map. You think they’re roads. And he says, “No, no, that’s just how you might want to go through the steppe.” It’s a totally off-road kind of thing.

So [off wee go!] We did get a truck, that kind of Kamaz and drove with five guys. None of the girls wanted to go. I was the only one who went. And it was really one of the most incredible experiences of my life. And we recorded these old ladies singing wolf songs, how to call wolves, and things like that. It was really incredible. And so we made this epic about it. But we kind of made up the epic. But I also got this part from *New York Times* about the last wolf being shot in New York, when that happened—the whole story of that. This is when I got interested in epics. And then in 2002, when my book on shamanism was being published, then we had a big opening in Kiev. And these anthropology people came, and ethnography, for the opening with the photographs and all that. We’re standing there talking, and the Buryat guy who did the photographs said, “Oh, too bad Ukrainians don’t have shamanism.” And the woman said, “What do you mean we don’t have shamanism? We have the *Hutzul koliada*.” And I had never

heard of that. I thought *koliada*, like caroling. I know all about it. But this was something totally different. And she hooked us up.

We went way into the mountains, and we started working with this group. And to this day, we still work with them. They're an incredible bunch of guys. And we did a piece about an old woman doing the Christmas Eve dinner where you have twelve dishes. And you're supposed to invite all the spirits to it, but also everything you're afraid of, like bears and winter and storms and stuff like that. And you're supposed to invite them three times. Then you're supposed to say, "Well, if you don't come now to my delicious dishes, don't come all year." And she says, "You know, I'm all alone, I wouldn't mind if you guys come." And that's what that was about. So we did our show with that. [00:05:01]

And then at the Ukrainian Museum we made an installation with all the photographs, from Christmas Eve to Epiphany. I had found this text from the 1770's of a nativity puppet play that I thought was very good, actually, very interesting. Because it's a nativity puppet play, but it's all about Herod, and death coming for Herod. Jesus Christ doesn't even put in an appearance in it. [laughs] And Nina Arianda was in *Death* that year. She was still at NYU, I think. She's the one who got the Tony last year. And so we did [the show and it was] very good. And then we did it at the museum. It was very beautiful there.

And then I also started working with Kyrgyz. I had gone to Kyrgyzstan, again just to visit a friend, to help them move. Somebody said, "If you come help me move, I'll pay your ticket if you find me an apartment." Because he had to start work the next day, and he didn't want to live in a hotel.

Well, I found an apartment in three days. Then I had three weeks to hang out. And I started going to the theater. And I first saw this terrible theater, and then I finally got hooked up with this group. It was, again, like finding ourselves on the other end of the planet. And their director had just gotten a job with the local opera, so all of a sudden the fact that I was interested—and also they had known the Buryats who I'd worked with, and they had heard good things. So we started making together this big project. I translated *Janyl Myrza*, which is about a woman warrior. We did a whole big project on that. And that was very, very cool.

Johnston: So before, you said that you had to convince a tiny bit the Ukrainian community that it was really good to broaden the audience. With your American audiences, how did they react to this clash of worlds that you said you were really interested in?

Tkacz: I think our audience is interested in that. This is the world music audience. Our audience is, you can't believe people are sitting next to each other, because there are all the Ukrainian ladies, people who are from very different parts of the world. But our Mongolian audience still comes to some of our pieces that are now Ukrainian, because they know what it's going to be like. It's going to be something really out of this world most of the time [laughs].

I had a Fulbright [scholarship], and I did a piece with my students. And that became a really big hit that we did all over Kyrgyzstan. And eventually we brought it here. And then one day I was sitting and talking to Kenve—I really liked her as an actress. I usually make pieces for people. I like the person, or the actor or the performer or something, and I really want to do something with them. And I had a conversation with her about how traditional music's disappearing. Eight hours later I was on a plane, I was in Kiev, and I was having the same conversation with [Nina]. And I thought we should make a piece about that, with two mothers and two daughters. And they're totally unrelated cultures. I mean, this is Muslim, and this is Christian and Turkic and Ukrainian. There's nothing in common, but it's the same problem. The mothers want to pass this on, and the kids are just interested in city, city, city.

The first twenty minutes is these beautiful songs, and you totally understand what's happening with not a word of English. And then in the second part the [girls] go into the city. And Debutante Hour, this very funny indie group here in New York, played the underworld people. And the first hell you fall into is television you can't rip your face away from. [laughs] So you're turning upside down, and then there's disco, endless discotheque, and finally they lose language and they become Scythian stones, these markers in the desert nobody can talk to anymore. We know something about that culture, but very little. You can't communicate with it anymore. [00:09:43]

That was a really great piece. We did that at festivals and everything. Then we also did some smaller [pieces], like this [one] called *Raven*. And it was really cool. It was a poetry piece. Then we did a piece called *Dream Bridge*. It was the same poet [Olek Lysheha] I really love. And then we went back to this material that I told you about the reaping and the trees and the talking. That was the first time we actually went back to something and did a totally different version of it, to the point where it was almost non-recognizable from the original material. But we did it in the big theater at La MaMa. And that's when I met Jeremy. That's a whole new group of people, young, because it's a very young cast in that. And the people who had been

with us actually sang the traditional songs. It's trees encountering human beings for the first time. It's like, [whispering] "Get me out of here." [laughs] And there are people chasing the spirits off the stage and into the deep forest, and then finally, [there are no more trees] they're just the things that are going to be reaped. Then there's this [Aleksandr] Dovzhenko movie, *The Earth*, where the reaping becomes mechanical and then eventually becomes digital. As it finally comes down, it's like they all turn digital. So that's what I did last.

Johnston: So what are your hopes for Yara Arts Group? I know that you said that so much has been about chance, but do you have aspirations for how this group will continue to grow?

Tkacz: We have some projects we started. There's a big one in Donetsk. We've been working with this group from Donetsk. We did, in October, something called *Underground Dreams* with Serhiy Zhadan, the poet who's gotten beaten up. That was in the *New Yorker* and everything. We translated several of his books. We were working on this piece with him in Donetsk. We were supposed to do it mid-July in Donetsk. I just got an email this morning saying we have to Skype and set all this up. Exciting time to be there, but I have never been anywhere without exciting times. [laughs]

Johnston: You somehow bring it, or something.

Tkacz: We were there in Kyrgyzstan the first day of the revolution [laughs]. I don't know why it happens to me. My mother used to say, "The CIA should call you and find out where you're going." [laughs]

Johnston: Now, did I hear correctly that this has been a very busy time for you because of all of the upheaval that has been going on? In what way have you been connected to that? And in what way has this meant that you've been fielding lots of emails, et cetera, about this?

Tkacz: Well, we've been staying up all night watching TV from there. There's this online channel, because we know all the people involved. I don't usually go visit family. I usually go see, do theater and visit the poets we translate. I did a whole book of poetry. I never set out to translate anything, but I wind up using it in my theater pieces. Here, I'll show you. Can I move a couple feet away?

Johnston: Yeah, you can take that with you.

Tkacz: I don't think I even have to. So this [book] is our translations until 2002. This is only fallout from our [theatre productions]—this is the Ukrainian stuff, too—fallout from our shows. Like I start doing something, and there's so much. So this book here, this is the poems, the bilingual that we used in our shows. And then here, this is about the making of the pieces. There's Ukrainian, and then it's in English. And then it's the various poets and everything else. So it's like 800 pages. We do a lot of stuff. I wanted to read something else here. Oh no, I can't take it off, because I can't see it. Where is it?

Johnston: Here.

Tkacz: Just one second, I'll show you.

Johnston: Okay.

Tkacz: Here, I'll show you books. It's very different. No one believes one person did these. [laughs] So we got that one. That's our translation. Here, this is our Kyrgyz epic.

Johnston: You got it? [00:15:00]

Tkacz: Yeah, this is the Kyrgyz epic theater book we did. Here's the Buryat shamanism book we did. We won best book on religion that year. And here's the new one, *Modernism in Kiev*. These are totally academic articles. And then there's a children's book [laughs]. So we got a very unusual [sequence here].

You know what, I wouldn't mind chopping some stuff up to put in the soup, if you don't mind.

Johnston: Okay.

[END OF FOURTH AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF FIFTH]

Johnston: Okay, so we were talking about some of the groups that you've brought over here. You suggest it's been a very collaborative process, right, that you've been working with them. It's not like you just commission stuff brought over here. But what do the artists you've been working with make of the East Village? You said it's about this collision of worlds. What do they think about your natural habitat and your circumstances here, and what do they get from their time here?

Tkacz: Well, depends who. The villagers, I always say to them, “I don’t live in New York. I live in the East Village.” And they live in the village. [So] It’s not that different. We walk everywhere, too. [laughs]

Johnston: So do you feel like there is an East Village kind of mentality then, or there’s a sense of local pride?

Tkacz: Yes, I think very much so. And they just all love the fact that our newspaper’s called *The Village Voice*, because when I translate it, everybody always laughs. But then a lot of the people we work with, like Zhadan, are urban avant-garde in their own world.

Johnston: Can you tell me a little bit more about what you think is specific to this part of town? Is it the fact that there’s a newspaper that covers the Village, or what makes this—

Tkacz: Well, there’s more than one, thank god. [laughs] Part of it is that there’s a lot of unique stores here that are not part of chains. And the fact that they’re disappearing’s really hard to take. And you see it happening constantly. That people live here for a long time, as opposed to move constantly, really makes a big difference. Because there’s a sense of local. I walk down the street, I know half the people I see. I don’t know the NYU students. You see the new ones in September, and they’re all a little chubby. And then, come December, they’re all very sleek girls, the freshmen. It’s a huge difference, very funny [laughs], because the freshmen dorms are right here. And they come in as Jersey girls or wherever they’re from. Don’t ask me, but they become different. In half a year, I tell you.

Most of the other people are here all the time. And you see the same people over and over. There are the same people at the meat store. There are the same people at the coffee shop. I make very little money, but I make every effort to buy local here. Also Greenmarkets [Farmers Markets], et cetera. But more specifically, if I’m going to get a present, I’m going to want to go to one of the little stores here, because I think they should be around, and ‘if we don’t support them, who will’ kind of deal.

Johnston: So you were saying earlier on, around 1974, you were living in this building and things were pretty bad, with junkies in the hallway, et cetera. Did you ever consider leaving this part of town?

Tkacz: No, because I was working theater. I was doing what I was doing. We came up with the Village Halloween Parade in this apartment, with Ralph Lee. That was like the first thing we did. We wanted to show his costumes. I remember that. I stage-managed the first couple of them. Ugh, what a mess. [laughs] I got pneumonia out of a New Year's celebration we did in Central Park. But when you're that age, it's okay. You survive it. [laughs] And you learn not to do it again.

Johnston: Can you tell me a little bit more about the social events you've organized outside of the theater in this part of town? [00:04:20]

Tkacz: Oh, but everything I do is that. We do mid-summer stuff, Kupala. We do it at the Ukraine Sports Club, which is this very old bar. We do it new style there, and old style we do it in the parks. We used to do it in the gardens. We had very big events sometimes, but it depends who's around, and who I manage to organize. Sometimes, if we're doing a show, then it becomes a gigantic thing. Then we do a lot of stuff in the galleries, and in the Ukrainian Museum, the Ukrainian Institute on 79th Street, and various events. But recently, with all the political events in Ukraine, we've been going to a lot of demonstrations. And Vova [Waldemont Klyuzko], who's been staying in my place because he's the designer in two of our shows, he's done these beautiful posters. You should see those. And we're probably going to do a big show with him somewhere about that. We talked to gallery [and to a museum]. So I'm always doing twenty-five things. Because it's like the books: our projects generate all this stuff, and it seems a shame not to do something with it.

Johnston: Do you think you've somehow managed to introduce a wee bit of the East Village spirit into Kiev theater, or whatever?

Tkacz: Oh yeah, definitely.

Johnston: It's a sort of exchange? How does that work?

Tkacz: And they all come here. We did Bowery Poetry live in Lviv. That's another book we did. [laughs] You want to see that?

Johnston: Sure.

Tkacz: I don't know if I could reach it, but I think—

Johnston: Yeah, how far away is it? Can you take this [lavalier microphone] with you?

Tkacz: This is all tangled up, is the problem. It's not a huge book. It's like a chapbook.

Johnston: Oh, very nice.

Tkacz: So we did that in September. The guys [Serhiy Zhadan and Kateryna Babkina] who performed here at the Bowery Poetry were there, plus the founder of Bowery Poetry Project [Bob Holman], who was in the Captain John Smith show, and Susan Hwang, and me and Julian [Kytasty]. So we were five people, and we were all done bilingual. So that was very cool. They all meet each other through me very often. I introduce them to people from other parts of town, or to the traditional folks, who they wouldn't normally know. I'm always surprised about that. Or poets I really like, I introduce to each other sometimes. Sometimes they know them, sometimes they don't.

Johnston: So can I ask for some clarification? What was Kupala that you mentioned?

Tkacz: That's mid-summer [ritual].

Johnston: Okay, what happens? When you do it? [laughs]

Tkacz: We throw wreaths into the river and light candles, all that kind of stuff. Run around to the gardens and do rituals. It's a lot of fun. It's really great. Music and fortune telling and all that.

Johnston: Okay, a couple of other questions. You said that there was this real rule round about 1974, just in terms of methadone and heroin and stuff like that. What happened next? Because now it's not the case. What do you think happened?

Tkacz: Well, I worked for the city after that, in [the] late Seventies. And the city went broke. That was the worst. I didn't get paid for one summer's work. I passed out on the street and fell, because I was eating a slice of pizza every other day. And all these old people had so many problems. How could you not address them? Anyway, so what happened was eventually they all let us go. And the city almost collapsed. And then after that, a lot of artists moved in here in the Eighties. And there was a real boom in terms of the art market, and things got very expensive

suddenly—like very suddenly. And then that crashed with AIDS, basically. That was probably the biggest, worst thing that happened in this neighborhood, because whole generations at La MaMa got wiped out totally.

We tried to bring back some of the pieces. Every time they have an anniversary, we realize there's a whole group of people, there's nobody alive from a whole show with twenty, thirty people. It's just beyond belief. I worked for Wilford Leach, who was a wonderful director. We did a bunch of things then. That's when I realized how devastated that community was, and the people I met then. And since then, most of them have died. These are people who normally would be your mentors. So that was devastating. That was in the Eighties.

And by the end of the Eighties there was the dot-com thing. And that got suddenly wealthy again here a little bit, got fancy-fancy. And then suddenly gone, then that bust. And the rents kind of stabilized again. Since then it's been a growing thing, just very continuously becoming more and more expensive. [00:10:35]

Johnston: What do you think about the neighborhood today?

Tkacz: I can't imagine living anywhere else. But I have lived long periods of my life in a tent [laughs] in Siberia, and in yurts in Kyrgyzstan. And it's livable. You can live other places, but—

Johnston: So you're not in a tent in Tompkins Square Park at the moment, but you could do it.

Tkacz: I guess, I don't know. I haven't thought much about it. Hopefully not. [laughs]

Johnston: I guess I'm getting towards the end of my questions, but I was wondering if there's anything that I haven't asked? I want to leave it really, really open. What sort of message might you like to be on this tape?

Tkacz: I don't have a message, really. I believe you have to be open to accidents. And that is when you really discover [great] things. I don't have plans and hopes for Yara. I just hope I'm well enough to continue, because it takes an incredible amount of effort on my part to keep it going, and to do all this. I know how much effort it took Ellen to do all this. I just hope that I am as open to new things happening as she always was. And you can't plan on that. You can't. You got to just suddenly see it. And it's like, duh, I get it! [laughs] And so how do you incorporate that into what you do? You can't. That's, I think, the important thing.

Johnston: Are there parts of this neighborhood that you find very stimulating? That you find particularly good for your creativity?

Tkacz: I like the fact that everybody's different on the street, that you can go talk. You know what I miss? I miss Kim's Video. I really miss it. That's the one thing I really miss in this neighborhood. It was a video rental place that had really bizarre films, independent movies of the most you-never-heard-of sorts. And it was open until four in the morning. And from midnight to four you met a lot of interesting people there who could tell you everything about this movie, or that and that, or whatever. That I miss. I really miss that, because I used to get really interesting information there. [Now] It's on the web, but it's all very impersonal. And maybe Netflix is better at predicting what I'd like, but I'm not sure I want to see what I'd like. I want to see something I've never seen before. And it's only when you meet somebody bizarre like that, and they say, "Oh, you haven't heard of this? Well, how can you be alive and not have—" And then I think, yeah, yeah, how can I be alive [laughs] and not have heard of this? How can I breathe my next breath without it? And suddenly I'm whipped up into this whole other world. That I miss. And I don't know where else it happens.

It used to happen at St. Mark's Bookstore, too, in the middle of the night. They're not open as late, but at ten o'clock, eleven o'clock, all these strange people—not strange, it's like other people who can't sleep or something. Strand [Book Store] has some of that still, where you run into people suddenly and you start talking about poetry, and you find out they're a major poet. And they're reading you this and that, and this and that. And I'm like, "Yes, yes." I like that. I like that kind of community. I don't know where it happens these days. It must happen somewhere. Maybe it happens in Brooklyn now, I don't know. And I don't know where. Maybe it happens on websites. But I feel like I get more and more of what I like, as opposed to what I really never heard of, anymore. **[00:15:16]**

Johnston: That's a really interesting point. All right, any closing remarks?

Tkacz: No, I think that's a good one. [laughs]

Johnston: All right. Well thank you very, very much.

Tkacz: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]