Eccentric Performance Artist Pries Open Even Weirder Neo-Stalinist Country Of Belarus in P.O.V.’s “Belarusian Waltz,” Tuesday, Aug. 12 on PBS

Painter and Provocateur Alexander Pushkin Takes His Countrymen to Task for Submitting to “Free Slavery” Under Dictator Alexander Lukashenko

A co-production of ITVS International

An introduction to the nation of Belarus might sound like a Rod Serling voiceover: “a country inhabiting a twilight realm somewhere between past and present, East and West, a lost national identity and an imposed colonial one, where freedom is slavery, and dictatorship is the new democracy.” Belarus, one of the nations formed in 1991 from the breakup of the Soviet Union, is indeed a strange and little-known country in a region of growing strategic importance. But our perfect guide to this murky upside-down world turns out to be not a science-fiction master, but a post-modern performance artist with a distinctly Eastern European slant and a single-minded determination to expose the Stalinist scowl hiding behind the leader’s technocratic smile.

It isn’t easy being a rebel in country where the majority of people support a dictatorship precisely because it is a dictatorship, as the new documentary Belarusian Waltz eloquently demonstrates. This is the alternately comic and tragic tale of Alexander Pushkin, who employs wheelbarrows of dung, mock patriotic displays and portraits of condemned Nazi collaborators to challenge the dictator Alexander Lukashenko’s power and, even more, to get Belarusians to talk about what is happening in their country. If there’s one thing Belarusians seem to agree on, it’s that they should keep quiet about history, politics and culture. Which makes Pushkin’s avant garde street theater perhaps less of a challenge to the regime than a continuing irritant to Pushkin’s family, neighbors, old girlfriend (and mother of his child) and a series of nonplussed policemen and passersby.

Andrzej Fidyk’s Belarusian Waltz has its broadcast premiere on Tuesday, Aug. 12, 2008 at 10 p.m. on PBS, part of the 21st season of P.O.V. (Check local listings.) American television’s longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. is public television’s premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films and recipient of a 2007 Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking.

A nation of almost 10 million people lying between Russia, Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states, Belarus has been called Europe’s last dictatorship. The regime of Alexander Lukashenko fields thousands of secret police and informers, as well as a large army, to harass, intimidate and arrest independent journalists, national minorities and opposition politicians. His government is the most pro-Russian of the former Soviet republics, and practices a Soviet-style economy. First elected in 1994, Lukashenko has had his rule repeatedly extended through further elections and referendums, while styling himself “the shepherd” in a softened echo of the Stalinist cult of personality. As seen in Belarusian Waltz, Lukashenko presents a mild, smiling visage while happily intermingling with the people.
But no one is fooled. Lukashenko and his regime maintain an old-style, authoritarian grip on society. One lone opponent, who manages to speak out despite repeated arrests and beatings, is the 42-year-old painter, performance artist and nationalist activist Alexander Pushkin from the village of Bobr. And if there is anything that enrages Pushkin more than Lukashenko’s dictatorship itself, it’s the acquiescence of Belarusians. The elections are rigged, but wouldn’t need to be. The numerous police and army seem almost comically superfluous before a quiescent and self-described (by Pushkin’s father) “humble and patient” people. In fact, Lukashenko and the people seem to agree on one fundamental thing — that a dictatorial regime such Lukashenko’s is exactly what the Belarusian people need.

**Belarusian Waltz** is a moving account of Pushkin’s desperate, inspired and sometimes loopy attempts to disrupt this dance between dictator and people with such public displays as “A Wheelbarrow of Dung for President Lukashenko” and “Glory to the Soldier of Independence,” and in the making of **Belarusian Waltz** itself. The Belarus he exposes as both an insider and outsider is not the result of a simple compact between ruler and ruled. It is, rather, a country where after 200 years of Russian domination and 80 more of Soviet rule, the people hardly have a national identity; where they willingly suppress their native Belarusian language in favor of Russian; and where history seems to begin and end with the Red Army victory over Nazi Germany in 1945.

For Pushkin, more intimately, Belarus is a place where neighbors snarl when they see him with the camera crew in tow; where his father and sister (Lukashenko supporters) lament the pain Pushkin brought to his deceased mother with his public “stunts;” and where his ex-girlfriend, an expatriate Russian and the mother of his daughter, accuses him of using politics as an excuse for selfishness. They all ask repeatedly why he wants to “malign” the country. People on the streets watch in confused silence as he is arrested and manhandled at his performances. Belarus is also seen as a place of widespread poverty, where endemic drunkenness makes life tolerable, where horse-drawn carts jostle with automobiles, peasant villages abut modernist constructions, and animals cavort freely in muddy roads. And where no one wants to talk about anything of consequence.

Pushkin emerges in **Belarusian Waltz** as something more complex than a simple crusader for freedom. A large ego does drive him, irrespective of the possible consequences to those around him. Through his peculiarly Eastern European lens, he charges the regime with being “totalitarian neo-Stalinist collective fascism,” and celebrates as his heroes men who turn out to have collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. One of these, though he is far from striking a heroic pose or even understanding his son’s philosophy, is his own father, who worked as a policeman in the hire of the Nazi occupiers. There is also the unanswered question of why Pushkin has suffered no worse than short-term arrests and beatings, allowing him to regroup for another street demonstration.

At one point in **Belarusian Waltz**, Lukashenko is seen at a public event staring, it would appear, directly into the filmmakers’ camera, with a knowing and unflappable smile. It’s an unsettling moment that bears out the strange challenge facing Pushkin.

“To make a film within a dictatorship is a dangerous undertaking not only for us, but also for those being filmed,” states producer Grude. “It is, however, our obligation to do our utmost to give voice to the voiceless and to use art as a means to change the world.

“During filming Andrzej Fidyk was arrested by the KGB and at times the prospects for finishing this film were bleak. We thankfully managed to complete it and it is with great pride we are able to present this film to a world audience. I hope with all my heart it inspires people to learn more about what goes on in Belarus and to take an active role in freeing the Belarusian people from the oppression.”

In March 2008, the U.S. State Department dubbed Lukashenko’s government a "brutal, authoritarian dictatorship" and imposed sanctions on the foreign assets of state oil company, Belneftekhim, to press for democratic reforms. The U.S. ambassador left Belarus that month, and the U.S. Embassy cut its staff from 35 to 17 under pressure from the Belarusian government, which made similar cuts
at its embassy in Washington. On March 27, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) appealed to the international community to urge the Belarusian authorities to stop persecuting independent journalists, citing massive raids on the homes and offices of journalists suspected of working for foreign and non-state Belarusian media outlets.

On April 30, Belarus expelled 10 U.S. diplomats in Minsk, ordering them to leave the country in 72 hours. The following day, the Associated Press reported that the State Department would be closing the U.S. Embassy in Belarus and ordering Minsk to recall its diplomats from Washington and New York. "In a new escalation of a diplomatic dispute, Belarus has been given until May 16 to withdraw its six diplomats at the two missions, and the American embassy in Minsk will cease operations as early as Friday, May 2," the wire service reported.

Belarusian Waltz is a co-production of Piraya Film AS, ITVS International, MG production, Rafto House Foundation and Telewizja Polska S.A.

Andrzej Fidyk
Director/Writer
Andrzej Fidyk has directed more than 40 documentaries for Polish and British television and has received numerous awards for his work. Many regard Fidyk as Poland's finest documentary director. His credits include “Battu’s Bioscope” (aka “Mobile Cinema of Dreams,” 1998) and “The Parade” (1989). Fidyk was originally educated as an economist, majoring in international trade from the University of Warsaw. He lives in Warsaw, Poland.

Torstein Grude
Producer
Torstein Grude is a painter, director, cinematographer and producer, and one of the initiators of the independent production company Piraya Film AS. He received a degree in media theory and film history from the University of Bergen in 1994, and enrolled at the London International Film School where he finished the last year of training in 1997. Grude’s credits include the features “Yodok,” “On a Tightrope” and “Welcome Home,” as well as “Tin Soldiers,” “Instant Happiness,” Heaven Inside Us,” “The Con Kid” and “Satan Rides the Media.” His films have been screened at more than 100 festivals and have received many awards. He lives in Stavanger, Norway.

Credits:
Director: Andrzej Fidyk
Producer: Torstein Grude
Cinematographer: Adam Fresko
Editor: Jan Mikotaj Mironowicz
Original Music: Krzesimir Debski

Running Time: 56:46

Festivals:
- Norwegian Premiere: Bergen International Film Festival, November 2007
- European Academy Awards – Prix Arte – Nominee, December 2007
- Prix Europa Nominee, December 2007
- One World Prague, March 2008
- Hot Docs, April 2008

ITVS International is a division of the Independent Television Service that promotes an international exchange of documentary films made by independent producers, bringing international voices to U.S. audiences, and American stories to audiences abroad. Through a unique public-private partnership called the Global Perspectives Project, ITVS International administers the International Media Development Fund (IMDF) and True Stories: Life in the USA. The IMDF funds international producers and supports the American broadcast of their programs. True Stories: Life in the USA promotes a series of American independent films to
Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and celebrating its 21st season on PBS in 2008, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running showcase on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through October, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought more than 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, P.O.V.’s Borders. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today’s most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V. is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

**P.O.V. Interactive** (www.pbs.org/pov)
P.O.V.’s award-winning Web department produces special features for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video, and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. P.O.V. Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, P.O.V.’s Borders. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov has launched the P.O.V. Blog, a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite films, get the latest news and link to further resources. The P.O.V. Web site, blog and film archives form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

**P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education**
American Documentary | P.O.V. works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, P.O.V. offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, P.O.V.’s Youth Views works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training so they may use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, The Educational Foundation of America, The Fledgling Fund, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, The September 11th Fund and public television viewers. Funding for P.O.V.’s *Diverse Voices Project* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston and Thirteen/WNET New York.

**American Documentary, Inc.** (www.amdoc.org)
American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. Simon Kilmurry is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.

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