

# In the Belly of the Beast

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The author finds himself on stage in a one-piece polyester terrorist-workout suit in "Disco Dictatorship: We Will Live to See Endorphins in Nameless Anonymity." **Ken Reynolds**

I have written about this kind of thing a time or two. A critic sits comfortably in a theater hall until that moment when the safety of the darkness is shattered and said critic finds himself in a spotlight or on stage as a participant in a show he thought he had just come to watch.

These moments have invariably lasted a few seconds. A hug, a kiss, a slap on the hand. I once got pulled on stage to "ride" in an elevator six floors with a lonely actor. That took three or four minutes. I once got married and kicked out by my new stage wife in the course of two minutes.

That's all kid's stuff compared to what happened to me last week on the stage at Fabrika in a show called "Disco Dictatorship: We Will Live to See Endorphins in Nameless Anonymity."

What I still find hard to believe is that I volunteered to go up on that stage. Actually, I should say: I didn't volunteer entirely of my own free will. Let me explain that.

You see, the creator of the show Donatas Grudovich was shouting at us aggressively. If eight of us spectators didn't volunteer to join him on stage, he would come after us and pluck us out of our seats one by one. He was dressed in what he calls a futuristic space suit, but what looked to me like a terrorist outfit, and he didn't look like someone I wanted to fool with. Plus, before entering the hall I had been coerced by a kind young woman also dressed in terrorist garb to sign a waiver agreeing I would do whatever I was told to or I would suffer punishment.

I still didn't go up there on stage right away, though. I cowardly cowered in the back like the rest of the folks. Two people went up. Grudovich barked at us louder. Three more went up. "I need three more people in the next 30 seconds!" the actor shouted. "Then I'm coming after you!" Two more people went out on stage. The sweat's running down my back. One person to go. Oh, come on. There must be one more brave soul in this godforsaken hall!

"I need one more person!" Grudovich howled angrily. I could see now he was backed by several more "terrorists." This was serious. I waited.

"Oh, come on, somebody!" I thought to myself and then felt that push or that pull that comes at you from the Lord-knows-where. Call it the Hand of Fate. I was up and on my way down to the stage.

Now, I could make this into a very long story. There's a lot to tell. But who reads more than 1,000 words on the Internet anymore? Let me cut this to a few chases.

**Chase One: The Suit.** Now, this was cruel. Standing at the stage's edge was a haberdasher's rack filled with terrorist jump suits. Grudovich called the volunteers over one by one and handed us uniforms.

"Go backstage and change into this," he said, eyeing first my rather, uh, full frame and then the slim polyester jump suit.

Backstage everybody else was doing fine. I was hopping on one leg in my underwear but I couldn't get the pant legs over my calves. It was impossible. After a minute or two of genuine physical work that induced several ripping sounds in the unyielding material, I got the thing up to my waist. How I was going to get the sleeves up over my shoulders I had no idea. I was already soaked in sweat — I think from the embarrassment as much as from the work. But I was working hard.

Eventually one of my fellow volunteers lent a hand and with a grunt he got the top of the uniform over my shoulders. I felt like one of those Russian babies when they're born and swaddled by those sadistic nurses. My legs would hardly move. My arms were sticking out to the side. But, putting some effort into it, I pulled the zipper in front almost up to my neck and waddled out on stage.

The first thing Grudovich did was to look at me and — I think — stifle a laugh. He marched over to me and said, "Here, this might make you feel better," and he pulled the zipper down to my belly button. My hairy chest popped out followed instantly by a huge burst of laughter

from the hall. I had no idea there were so damn many spectators there.

**Chase Two: The Work.** We volunteers were accompanied everywhere by our own personal terrorist. She was a very kind young woman who shouted orders at us over the din of the music, the actors performing and Grudovich singing and howling. "Dance like this," she would say and show us what to do by kicking her legs out from under her. "Twirl like this," she would whisper and start spinning. "Grab each other and bounce your neighbor's shoulder," she instructed.

I am doing this woman a disfavor by calling her a terrorist. It's true that this impression is also important. But the woman accompanying us would probably best be described as our personal trainer. She was there to keep us happy and entertained. We danced and we sang — yes, I sang a whole couplet into a microphone, astonished to hear my own voice booming throughout the hall — and we exercised and worked out as though we were intent on making Jane Fonda jealous.

Every once in awhile I noticed something else was happening on stage. A cop planted a bag of drugs on a kid. A man in a Vladimir Putin mask came out and started shredding something — was it his own face? People were getting beat up. I couldn't tell if it was the cops taking the blows or dishing them out. There was a polar bear. What he was doing out there, I don't know. But he was gone really fast. Somebody else was dressed like an apartment building — a human turned into a block of cement.

Through it all music is pounding and Grudovich is shouting. I have no idea what is going on because I'm so busy dancing and doing this fitness stuff. Oh, and combat training. They had us crawling under crowd-control barriers and leaping over them. I'll admit, the first time I ran around the end of the obstacle hoping no one would notice. But when they brought us back around a policeman stood glowering at me with a look I have only seen at unauthorized protests on Moscow streets. I took a deep breath, threw one leg up on top of that barrier and went flying over. I did it almost gracefully, I think, if I may say so myself. At least no one laughed.

**Chase Three: Afterthoughts.** Actually, thoughts began coming to me while I was still on stage. At a certain point it occurred to me that I had no idea what was going on in this show. I was so busy dancing and working out and following orders and running in circles and giving my neighbors back rubs that I couldn't possibly keep up with what was transpiring around me. I was aware of the woman giving me orders and of the person next to me whose hand I had to hold or whose shoulder I had to shake from time to time. Beyond that, everything else was a blur.

But was it?

I saw those drugs get planted. I know what that means. I saw people beating people up. That's pretty clear. I saw a man in a mask of the Russian rock star Viktor Tsoi come out and try to drown out a man in a Putin mask. I saw cops pickpocketing people while doing body searches. I caught glimpses of all of this and more. And in those rare moments of rest when I could quit huffing and puffing, they — and the seemingly chaotic context provided by Grudovich — began to make perfect sense.

This show put me and seven other people on the inside of a harsh picture of a society spinning out of control. We could sense that. This territory was aggressive. It felt dangerous. But we could only think about that on rare occasions. We were too busy having fun to really focus on that. Yeah, somebody just got beat to a pulp over there but, damn, I'm having trouble getting this dance move down. Everybody's going left and I keep going right. I've got to get back in swing here.

Donatas Grudovich created "Disco Dictatorship: We Will Live to See Endorphins in Nameless Anonymity" with his ensemble that he calls Partisan Theater. There's a [video](#) on YouTube that shows some snippets of what it can look like. I think it's a lot different from the show I was in, but then I may not be the best judge. I was inside the belly of the beast.

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