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MARIUS IVAŠKEVIČIUS

# Lithuania: Quarantine Withdrawal Syndrome

**When long-missed Lithuanian émigrés returned home during the Corona crisis they were no longer welcome. Like everything foreign they were treated as a threat. Marius Ivaškevičius diagnoses a split corona personality, torn between mourning the openness lost and enjoying the new sedentary isolation.**

In the Spring of 2020, when I had my first (and I hope only) experience of a global quarantine, I suddenly discovered that two very different – if not opposed – people live within me.

The first, who has now withdrawn into the shadows, met this pandemic and its shutting up of everyone and everything as no less than a personal tragedy. He was an open-world apologist who was used to fly to Europe and Russia several times a month (premieres, conferences, lectures), and to New York several times a year to visit a daughter studying there, and he watched in horror as long-forgotten borders reappeared in Europe and the idea itself of the European Union and its dream of unity were disappearing from our minds. He felt as though he had lost, had been crushed – it was an instant and absolute triumph of the “sedentary” against the “open”.

It suddenly became normal to see foreigners as lepers. Even people we knew, who were scrambling to return home on the last possible flights. Then all that was left was to take sea ferries, which brought back long-forgotten émigrés. The same ones that a depleted Lithuania had for many years tried to lure back. But when the Homeland saw them it was horrified and said: no, we don't need people like that. It tried to isolate them in hotel rooms, where they drank and smashed furniture. Then the prime minister called them “non-humans”, thus further establishing the “sedentary” majority's victory.

As a playwright, I gasped painfully as I watched theatres close across the world, including the thirteen that are performing my plays. This means that for the next few months, or perhaps even years, I will be without an income. As a father, I watched in sorrow as the skies emptied: the number of flights to Lithuania fell daily until only Minks–Vilnius remained open. And with this so collapsed any hope of my fifteen-year-old daughter returning home from New York. From a New York that was bleeding more and more, until it finally became the centre of the pandemic – the worst hotspot.

This is what was happening with me and within me during the first weeks of the quarantine. I often found myself flipping through the pages of an old Soviet-era atlas from my childhood. And I felt just as I had as a child: all of those distant, differently coloured countries were once again inaccessible, and therefore somewhat unreal, to me.

And then, suddenly, something shifted. That person who was open to the world withdrew and a sedentary one emerged. It was as though he had taken the wheel of my consciousness and set me onto a very short track, a strict, weekly rhythm: from Monday to Friday pleasantly back-breaking work writing a novel in the country followed by weekend excursions to an empty Vilnius. And it wasn't apathy, but rather a very focused period. I began to enjoy the emptiness, so that I stopped needing people and their company, except that of those closest to me. One morning I suddenly realised that on that day I would have flown from Tallinn to Baku, where the next day I would have begun leading a series of workshops for local playwrights. In other words, I would have spent the entire day being jostled in airplanes, with a stop in Istanbul. The mere thought made me shudder. I could no longer imagine that I once enjoyed such things. That other "I", the one open to the world, was already light years away.

I think that I was simply lucky: the quarantine came at a stage in my life in which I was in complete harmony with myself: I am happy with who I am, who I spend my time with, and what I do. As opposed to those for whom going to work or other forms of socialising are ways to escape from the small hell of their relationships. I felt true fulfilment, sharing, as I did, my disability with the rest of the quarantined world. I spent more time, and more meaningfully, with my daughter, who was imprisoned in a small Brooklyn apartment. My physical state markedly improved: all sorts of acid refluxes and other digestive problems vanished, as, it appears, they had been provoked by the constant, if imperceptible, microstress of travelling and switches from one cuisine to another.

And as the quarantine became stricter and voices could be heard urging authorities to practically declare a state of war and hand over control to the head of the military, I didn't launch into protest, though the old "I" would have been publicly sounding all the alarms. No, all I could think was: do what you want, as long as it doesn't interfere with my little quarantine paradise.

So, when the quarantine began to be gradually lifted, my now sedentary "I" saw it as a real tragedy and collapse. Everything annoyed me: the crowds of people, desperate to socialise, once again flooding the streets of Vilnius, the invitations to all sorts of events which I had to attend out of courtesy or sometimes duty. The foundation of my new life was slipping out from under my feet and I was grasping at straws: how could I stay on my short, sedentary tracks a little longer?

It was my daughter who saved me. The gradual revival of the airline industry made it possible to purchase a New York–Frankfurt–Vilnius ticket for her and to honestly tell all those issuing invitations: forgive me, but my daughter

is returning from New York and I will be forced to isolate myself with her for two more weeks.

Everyday I anxiously scanned the growing list of countries from which travellers would no longer need to quarantine themselves; if the US should be added to it, my dream would be shattered.

When my daughter landed in Vilnius I spent an hour and a half waiting for her outside the airport (we were not allowed to enter it). I watched as other arriving passengers ripped off their masks as soon as they exited the gates, as though they had escaped to a long-dreamed-of freedom. And there I was waiting for my daughter, who would give me two more weeks of longed-for imprisonment.

Finally, she too appeared, the very last one, with her two enormous suitcases. I threw my arms around her and kissed her so that we would instantly exchange all possible viruses and bacteria. Then I led her to the car.

We drove directly to the country and now I am the happiest man in the world. I continue to write my novel, while she attends online classes in New York.

One day I cautiously suggested to her: how about isolating ourselves for the whole summer? She looked at me as though I was insane. Her mother, a diplomat, and I had barely been able to contain her in the New York apartment, as she was keen to run off to the "Black Lives Matter" protests, which most of her school friends were joining. We kept her at home by pointing out that diplomats' children cannot participate in protests and warning her that if she ended up in jail she would miss her flight to Vilnius. And here I was, suggesting something even more absurd to her. Daddy, my friends are expecting me, she replied. As soon as these wretched two weeks are over you're driving me to Vilnius.

In other words, my sedentary "I" is living his final days. I will have seven premieres in the next theatre season – from Moscow to Barcelona. They mean both money and glory, and my open "I" is praying for that theatre season to take place.

As for myself, I don't know any more whether I want that or not. I'm completely lost.

*Translated from Lithuanian by Karla Gruodis*

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This article is available in English, French, German, and Italian on Voxeurop.

*Marius Ivaškevičius is a Lithuanian writer, playwright, and film director. His novels have been published in many foreign languages and his plays have been staged in Lithuania, Russia, Germany, Italy, France, and New Zealand. His accolades include 4 Best Lithuanian Play of the Year Awards and one Golden Mask Award for best play in Russia in 2017.*