
Developments in Japan and Overseas

Creating stages amidst war

Interviews with the directors of three Ukrainian theatres

Interviewer: Marina Kotelenets

(Director of the All-Ukrainian Public Organization “Ukrainian League of Authors”)



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On March 16, 2022, less than a month after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there were reports that Russian forces had bombed the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol, killing many people. At the time, the destroyed theatre was being used as a refugee shelter.

While Russian theatre researchers have been using the Internet to share the voices of Russian theatre artists, the situations of Ukrainian theatre artists are less readily visible.

The Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute approached the Ukrainian League of Authors in Kyiv, with whom we had established a connection through our “Theatre Born in Conflict Zones” project, to see if we could interview representatives from local theatres. The director, Marina Kotelenets, offered to personally conduct in-person or telephone

interviews with representatives from theatres in three regions facing different experiences with the war.

Ms. Kotelenets's interviews provide records of what happened to these theatres on the day of the invasion, what it has been like for them to engage in artistic creation under wartime conditions, and what they foresee for the future.

Theatre for mutual aid

Lesya Ukrainka National Academic Drama Theatre

(Kyiv)

<https://lesyatheatre.com.ua/>

The Lesya Ukrainka National Academic Drama Theatre is one of the largest drama theatres in Ukraine.

The Theatre's official history begins in 1926, when the Kyiv District Executive Committee organized the State Russian Drama Theatre. However, the Theatre's true roots extend back to the nineteenth century, when the outstanding actor and director Nikolai Solovtsov organized the Solovtsov Theatre as a permanent Russian theatre in 1891. It was located in the same building in which the Lesya Ukrainka Theatre now operates. It was renamed in 1941, after the renowned Ukrainian poetess and playwright Lesya Ukrainka.

For the last 25 years, the Theatre has been directed by Mikhail Reznikovich, one of the most recognized directors in Ukraine. He is a student and steward of the cultural traditions of the famous Soviet director, teacher, and theatre theorist Georgy Tovstonogov (1915–1989).

Until recently, the theatre was called the Lesya Ukrainka Kyiv National Academic Russian Drama Theatre. Until then, it had performed plays in Russian since its inception, inviting Russian directors to stage performances of classics by Chekhov, Ostrovsky, and Bulgakov, as well as those by contemporary Russian authors.

In March 2022, however, following the Russian Federation's invasion of

Juliet and Romeo*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time**The Cripple of Inishmaan*

Ukraine, the Theatre removed the phrase “Russian Drama” from its name and began translating its entire repertoire into Ukrainian.

Kyrylo Kashlikov is the Theatre’s managing director, as well as an actor and director there. He has been actively directing since 2014, when he staged *Juliet and Romeo*, a reworking of Shakespeare’s classic. Then he directed *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller (2016) and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Simon Stephens (2018). In subsequent years, he staged plays by two Irish authors: Martin McDonagh’s *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (2020) and Brian Friel’s *Translations* (2022). On February 24, the day Russia launched its invasion, a rehearsal of a completed production of *The Ferryman*, based on the play by Jez Butterworth, was scheduled on the Theatre’s big stage, but the release of that production had to be postponed.



Kyrylo Kashlikov

Managing director, actor, and director
at the Lesya Ukrainka National Academic
Drama Theatre

Interview date: October 10, 2022

24 February

When the war started, Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy ordered a halt to all performances in Ukrainian theatres. All employees had to work remotely, and at two-thirds of their normal salary. Some Theatre employees left Kyiv and Ukraine; others enlisted for territorial defense and were later sent to the front.

Kyiv became empty...

My family did not want to go anywhere, and I could not abandon the Theatre. Therefore, my wife and daughter decided to live with me there. Several of our actors and their families joined us, because their houses were located next to strategic sites that were periodically targeted in missile strikes.

As early as the first few days of March, the Ministry of Culture established contact with all its institutions and organizations, sent out reports, and exchanged information. Minister Oleksandr Tkachenko (Minister of Culture and Information Policy since June 4, 2020) began to analyze the situation and determined that it was possible to keep at least some forms of theatre open in Kyiv, despite the hostilities.

Those of us who remained in Kyiv were eager to do something. Ours was the only theatre in Kyiv considered suitably safe, which was the foremost priority for continued performances. We did not need to construct a bomb shelter, since there is a subway entrance right in front of the Theatre's entrance; when an air-raid signal sounded, we could open the doors and everyone in the audience could reach shelter within 2–6 minutes. The Minister himself visited the Theatre to



Three Loves, the first performance since the war began, played to a full house.

confirm how effectively our team operates during air raids.

So on April 9, 2022, we were able to present our first performance of *Tri Kokhannya* (Three Loves), dedicated to Lesya Ukrainka, on our 129-seat Small Stage. The venue was full, and everyone—both audience and actors—was in tears.

Alexander Tkachenko then asked us to present a performance for children, and by mid-April we

had prepared a children's stage performance. Many people came to it, with parents and grandparents bringing children. I was surprised at how many little Kyivans remained in the city. In our Theatre's hall there were 5- and 6-year-olds playing and crawling on the carpets—that sight alone left me crying again.

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Theatre and war

I realized that the war had changed the Theatre's mission. In March and April 2022, I kept remembering a thought by McDonagh: a character in one of his plays stated that it is when we stand on the edge of the abyss that we recall our humanity.

In April, Kyiv was half empty, but people from across the city came to our performances, thereby expressing protest against fear and danger. They came to the theatre in part to forget about everything for a while, but also, more importantly, to experience a sense of community and closeness. Theatre is the only art form that provides such a feeling of mutual belonging. Everyone, both actors and spectators, becomes united. Sometimes it felt like a scene from a post-apocalyptic movie in which people converged, gathering just to sit together. In April, our Theatre had become their gathering point.

Since we could not yet fully return to work at the Theatre (many actors had

left, and translations of our performances into Ukrainian were not yet ready), I proposed a “We are from Ukraine” theme, that we should perform readings of topical plays by Ukrainian playwrights, particularly those providing incisive reflections on the ongoing military events.

Through social networking, I invited all theatrical colleagues remaining in Kyiv to use our facilities. As a result, several independent projects began to utilize our Small Stage. This was our way of supporting theatre people—they still couldn’t earn much money, but hopefully at least enough to get by somehow. We also provided our venue to the Ivan Franko Kyiv National Ukrainian Theatre. Their theatre is as big as ours, but their large, beautiful building is located near the government quarter, and the danger of shelling and rockets made it impossible for them to work. They returned to their home venue in October, but even during those days of war, there was activity at our Lesya Ukrainka Theatre five days a week: the Ivan Franko Theatre performed on our stage on two days, we performed on another two, and one day each week was allocated to independent projects.

Later, actors and directors from the Mykola Kulish Kherson Theatre fled from southern Ukraine when Russian troops captured Kherson. Many decided to stay in Kyiv, so we extended opportunities to work on our stage to them, too. In October, we even released a jointly produced documentary performance, *Lyshatysja (Ne) Mozhna... (Staying is (Not) Possible...)*, based on the stories of actual Kherson theatre workers. Believe me, the venue was always at capacity seating for their performances.

I have always dreamed of improved solidarity between



Staying is (Not) Possible... Photo: Alexandr Kniga

actors, of theatrical people casting aside the jealousy and competition we tend toward, and instead becoming sincere friends. That suddenly happened during the war. For me, this has been a very important and valuable experience.

Our performances and our future

Our immediate reaction to the pain of military activity was a fresh read of Ukrainian drama. More time should pass before we attempt serious performances on the topic of the current war: a certain distance is needed, to disassociate ourselves from our painful reflections.

Therefore, I believe that our new production of Irish playwright Brian Friel's *Translations* is a more meaningful statement about the current situation in Ukraine.

I started working on this play two years ago and have been thinking about it all this time. That allowed us to stage it in just two months. In fact, this play presents a complete mirror image of the events taking place in Ukraine. *Translations* will soon become a classic, and this is very important, because it was not an impromptu creation. I believe that our "play of *Translations*" is already about *our* war, about the factors that led to it.

Will we resume performances of plays from Russian theatre? It is simply inappropriate to discuss that topic today. Seven members of our Theatre team are currently fighting at the front, and others are under contracts for territorial defense. Many families have lost loved ones. During work breaks, women go to the theatre buffet to weave camouflage nets for use at the front. No, now is not the time for discussions of Russian culture.

Our future repertoire will be more connected with Ukrainian classics. Mikhail Reznikovich, the Theatre's artistic director, is currently working on a stage version of the tragic novel *On Sunday Morning, She Gathered Herbs* by Ukrainian writer Olha Kobylyanska. But I still want to release a production of *The Ferryman* by Jos Butterworth, which was postponed due to the war.

Another problem confronting not only us, but all Ukrainian theatres, is loss of funding, resulting in inevitable budget cuts. Theatre subsidies have been reduced by 10% until the end of the year and will be cut by another 20% in 2023.



Translations Photo: Iryna Somova

This is a very serious problem, but we have sought and will continue to find opportunities to retain our team, both cast members and technical staff. We don't want to abandon our people in such difficult times.

Believe me, everything changed after February 24. We are no longer able to conduct strategic planning in the Theatre. At all. We simply don't have the energy or the time. On a daily basis, we can only consider prospects over the next six months, no more, so that is all we have been talking about.

We need to continue translating performances into Ukrainian, but doing so is a colossal job. In 2019, Ukraine adopted a law titled "On ensuring the functioning of the Ukrainian language as the state language," which required all performances performed in Russian to provide subtitles, so we have been dealing with this issue for a long time. In place of subtitles, we decided to provide audiences with simultaneous Ukrainian interpreting of performances via headphones.

On February 26, I created a Telegram channel group to allow operational communications with Theatre staff. Nearly our entire team, almost three hundred people, joined that group. Everyone immediately agreed to remove the words "Russian Drama" from the Theatre's name, and the actors took the position that they would only work in Ukrainian.

At the beginning of the war, the Theatre repertoire had about sixty

performances. Now, seven months later, 29 have already been performed in Ukrainian. Anyone involved in stage work will understand what an incredible job that is for actors who have worked only in Russian for their entire professional lives. But we will do it!

The theatre running away from the war

Luhansk Regional Academic Ukrainian Music and Drama Theatre

(Luhansk / Severodonetsk / Sumy)

<http://ukrugteatr.com>

The city of Luhansk is the center of the easternmost region of Ukraine. It is located sixty kilometers from the Russian border, so most of the region's population speaks Russian.

The Luhansk Regional Academic Ukrainian Music and Drama Theatre was founded in August 1941 as a theatre group in Kharkiv in northeastern Ukraine to serve Soviet military units and hospitals during World War II. After the 1944 liberation of the territory of Ukraine from the German invaders, the Theatre returned from evacuation to Luhansk, where it began working as a regional Ukrainian music and drama theatre.

Due to antiterrorist operations in eastern Ukraine, in December 2014 the Luhansk Theatre was to be moved from occupied Luhansk to the city of Severodonetsk, which remained controlled by the Ukrainian authorities. Most of the troupe remained in Luhansk, with only three employees (the director, the accountant, and one actor) reaching the new location. They alone faced the task of rebuilding the team in a new place and resuming full theatre operations as quickly as possible.

Eight years later, in March 2022, the Luhansk Theatre was again forced to evacuate from the war zone. In June 2022, Russian troops captured Severodonetsk.



Serhiy Dorofeev

Former Director and Artistic Director (2015-2022)
of the Luhansk Regional Academic Ukrainian Music and
Drama Theatre

Interview date: October 12, 2022

From Luhansk to Severodonetsk

Our Theatre has always worked in Ukrainian, and we were greatly loved by the public back in Luhansk, despite that being a Russian-speaking region. This is because our performances have always been better and more interesting than those in other Luhansk theatres.

The Theatre was moved to Severodonetsk, and when I headed it in 2015, its creative staff consisted of only ten people. But with just that limited staff, we had

The Theatre was allocated new premises in 2015, and our actors, who had left Luhansk for destinations throughout Ukraine, began to return to us. To expand our team, we invited students from various creative universities. Our Theatre gave some of them their first job.

By 2016, the Theatre's repertoire had grown to twelve performances. In that same year, the regional administration started major renovations of the old building, which was allocated specifically for our Theatre. In 2017, we got our own stage and excellent technical equipment. Finally, it felt as if we had a home again.

Since we were the only theatre in the Luhansk region (in the part that remained under Ukrainian control), we were tasked with meeting the needs of all categories of the local population. We thus staged performances for both adults and children. We performed classics (well-known and loved by audiences), musicals, entertaining performances, and modern plays. Since our team was very young—the average age of our troupe members was 25—we invited young

Ukrainian directors and playwrights. We tried to show audiences a modern, experimental theatre.

Note that Severodonetsk is by no means a theatre city. It is a small industrial town with a large chemical plant. Therefore, the public initially viewed us with distrust and considered theatre in Ukrainian as something unusual. But over time, audiences really fell in love with us. We attracted larger audiences, more fans...in general, we managed to turn the tide of opinion in the city.

I remained clearly aware of the Theatre's mission: to fortify Ukrainian culture in the region. For the purpose of cultural enlightenment, in 2018 we started our own theatre festival, to which we invited the most interesting performances from across Ukraine.

It was a wonderful eight years filled with very interesting and intense work, but the Theatre had to evacuate again in 2022. Once again, we had to leave our homes, our Theatre, and Severodonetsk, along with the relationships we'd cultivated there.

24 February

On February 24, all residents of the Luhansk region were asked to evacuate. The regional administration told the Theatre staff to prepare for departure, so we started packing our things. Even on February 24, we could hear flying, landing, and exploding missiles in Severodonetsk.

Actually, we already had an action plan prepared, so we were able to contact all employees in just fifteen minutes. We'd created lists in advance, specifying who was ready to leave, who would need help to evacuate, who could evacuate on their own, and who intended to remain in the city under any circumstances. Of course, not everything went according to plan: some of those who said they would stay were the first to leave, while some who'd planned to leave ended up staying in the city for a long time.

In February, there was chaos in Severodonetsk. Crowds of confused people. Huge transport convoys. Even so, the regional administration organized evacuations by rail, regularly traveling to the central and western regions of the country. There were even special buses to bring people to railway stations. That lasted for

over two weeks, until the railroad was bombed.

I remember it being very difficult to convince people of the need to leave Severodonetsk. Our employees used the Theatre basement to hide from the bombing and shelling. But even they did not immediately decide to leave; they thought everything would work out before they could move anywhere. Eventually, however, most everyone had to leave.

Interestingly, in 2014, only one-third of troupe members at the original Luhansk Theatre left our native Luhansk for territory controlled by Ukraine. The rest remained in Luhansk, accepted the so-called Luhansk People's Republic as the new government, and later a Russian one. By contrast, in 2022, more than 90% of our new young troupe left Severodonetsk for other territories of Ukraine or elsewhere in Europe. Among the remaining 5–8% were those who welcomed the Russians, but none were from our creative staff. Today, not a single one of our actors remains in Severodonetsk.

When Russian troops entered Severodonetsk in June 2022, a tank destroyed the theatre building with direct fire. There is a video recording of a captured Donetsk People's Republic fighter who explains why he fired ten shots at the theatre: because his commander believed that Ukrainian soldiers were hiding inside. But there were no soldiers there. I know that for sure, because until the last minute I remained in touch with colleagues who had been living and hiding in the Theatre. No one was hurt, thank God, but the theatre was destroyed. Only the walls remained.



The Luhansk Theatre in Severodonetsk was destroyed.

Our Theatre is a wanderer and a migrant

At the beginning of the evacuation, I joined part of the Theatre team in relocating to Dnipro (a large regional center in eastern Ukraine, located on the Dnieper, the largest river in Ukraine). There we worked on the stage of the Dnipro

Academic Drama and Comedy Theatre (<https://dramicom.dp.ua>), which accepted our troupe to its venue.

In July 2022, I was invited to become director of the M.S. Shchepkin Sumy National Academic Drama and Musical Comedy Theatre (<https://musicdrama.com.ua>) in northern Ukraine. At around that time, Oleksandr Grishkov, who worked as my deputy in Severodonetsk for eight years, headed the Luhansk Theatre.

Today, the Sumy Theatre actually houses two theatres, two legal entities with their own troupes and repertoires: the Luhansk Theatre and the Sumy Theatre.

The theatrical public in Sumy was at first surprised, wondering why they needed more than one theatre. But our first performances were sold out and were a great success with local theatregoers. The Luhansk Theatre in Sumy thus easily won over its audiences.

In August, the two troupes and theatres coordinated to produce a common project, *Will. Freedom. Victory.*, as a musical performance for the Independence Day of Ukraine holiday. Now this show is included in the Sumy Theatre repertoire, and it is very popular with audiences.

Our next coproduction will be Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. It will be a big musical performance with a live performance by the Sumy Theatre orchestra.



Will. Freedom. Victory.



Romeo and Juliet

Safety

The M.S. Shchepkin Sumy Theatre did not work during the first six months of the war, because the Sumy region was partially occupied by Russian troops and the city was surrounded. There was still danger even after the enemy was expelled from northern Ukraine. It was necessary to resolve all issues related to the safety of audiences and employees at the Theatre before we could conduct any performances. This was the first task I had to resolve as a director.

The Theatre had a basement, in which people were living and hiding during the city's besiegement. We have refurbished it in accordance with safety requirements. The basement can only accommodate 150 people, so I also formed an agreement with the Ukrainian Academy of Banking, which is located next door, that in the event of an air raid during one of our performances, they will share their bomb shelter with us, providing room for another 50 people. This allows us to sell more tickets and perform for 200 people (in an 800-seat auditorium, but still).

We have also opened a new experimental space directly below the revolving stage. A “stage beneath the stage,” that is in a sense its own bomb shelter. We have already staged two chamber plays at this venue: *Lungs* by Duncan Macmillan and *Borsch*, based



Lungs



Borsch

on stories by Ostap Vyshnya (an extremely popular Ukrainian satirist).

Life goes on without Russians

We have zero interest in plays by Russian authors, regardless of whether they are classics or contemporary works. Even in Severodonetsk our policy was for no shows by Russian authors, and I want to continue that in Sumy. Even if we come across good material, even if it is by an author with a neutral position toward the situation in Ukraine, the answer is still no. So far as I am concerned, there are no good Russians left, even including my own relatives from across Russia, from Petersburg to Kamchatka. We no longer share a common position. We exist in different worlds.

Now we are expanding the Theatre's repertoire, restoring previous performances in both our theatres. This is very difficult because many actors are on the road—some in other Ukrainian cities, some abroad—and all our scenery and costumes were burned in Severodonetsk. But under my lead, the Sumy Theatre has put on three (of course, small-scale) performances. As a gift for children in the region, we also perform *The Carnival of the Animals*, based on the musical suite by Camille Saint-Saëns, which allows children to become acquainted with musical instruments and learn some basic musical knowledge. Tickets for that show are always sold out. All our new performances are also popular.

But like Severodonetsk, Sumy is a small town, and small towns do not support long runs; after ten performances our potential audiences have dried up. Therefore, despite the war and the very difficult economic situation in Ukraine, we have to increase the pace of our work. But so long as we can maintain our creative activities, we will keep bringing in audiences.

Ukrainian playwright Natalia Vorozhbit's *Sasha, Take Out the Garbage* also entered the repertoire.



The people need theatre all the more during wartime. Visiting the theatre is not unlike visiting friends and relatives for understanding, for support. And we should provide them with that.

Theatre in the rear

Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre

(Ivano-Frankivsk)

<http://www.dramteatr.if.ua/>

The Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre is located in the city of Ivano-Frankivsk, in western Ukraine at the foot of the Ukrainian Carpathians (Prykarpattia). Both the city and the theatre bear the name of the outstanding Ukrainian writer, poet, and cultural figure Ivan Franko (1856–1916). Now, during the war, Ivano-Frankivsk is far from the front lines.

It was officially created in 1939 as a traveling theatre for amateur groups from western Ukraine. It became the first professional Ukrainian theatre in the Carpathian region during the Soviet era.

The website of the British Council describes the theatre as follows:

For a theatre that celebrated 80 years in 2019, the National Academic Drama Theatre (Ivano-Frankivsk) boasts a remarkably youthful and energetic troupe and staff — one aching for increased opportunity for innovation. Over the last decade Rostyslav Derzhypilskiy has served as artistic director of this venue that seats 900 in its large hall, and between 50–150 in its small hall. Theatre repertoire strikes a performance balance, featuring everything from treatments of contemporary Ukrainian popular fiction to a shock operatic production of *Hamlet* to Albert Camus's *Caligula*, staged by French director Jules Audry. Upcoming productions include works by Sophocles, Shakespeare and Chekhov.

The Ivan Franko Theatre has tirelessly pursued international links, completing tours to the United States, Canada, Italy and Poland. It is currently developing Ukraine's first Shakespeare Festival to feature both domestic and international productions. It has also put together the Gogol Fest and multi-disciplinary Porto Franko festivals. This is an experienced and versatile group, one open to international collaboration and creative exchange, which is ready to tour.

(https://www.britishcouncil.org.ua/sites/default/files/theatre_profile_if_nadt.pdf)

They are an experienced and versatile group, open to international collaboration, creative exchange, and ready to tour.



Rostyslav Derzhypilsky

General director and artistic director - actor, director, producer
at the Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre

Interview date: October 12, 2022

Repertoire without Russian

In 2019, our Theatre attained national status. From that time, we began to precisely plan our work as a theatre center for the whole of Ukraine. To that end, we invited the best directors in the country for our productions. In 2022, we had agreements with several Ukrainian and foreign directors.

We always planned our repertoire to include both classical plays and modern drama. We also included Russian authors, Chekhov and modern playwrights. The premiere of a play based on Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* was scheduled to take place here on March 12–13, 2022.

I have long dreamed of staging a work by Dostoyevsky, but at this moment, after Russia's invasion, all plays by Russian authors have been removed from our repertoire. Currently, staging Russian plays is out of the question.

February 24

At the beginning of the war, especially after learning about all the military horrors and murders, the question for me personally was, Is there really a need for a theatre in such times? But I did not remain in such a confused state for long.

Literally just a few days after the war started, we turned our theatre into a humanitarian and logistical center for transport and aid, supporting the soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and displaced persons from the eastern and southern parts of our country.

Our actors, even stars who are widely known in Ukraine and abroad, have become logisticians. Before the war, they participated in theatre projects across

Europe, even starring in movies and television projects. The people therefore placed a lot of trust in these actors, and in our team in general.

Funds from countries around the world immediately began to flow into the bank account of our public organization, which was established long ago to support our Theatre. In just a few days, we collected a lot of goods for humanitarian aid: medicine, household items for displaced persons, and many other things. This work was led by our employees: actors Nadiya Levchenko and Ivan Bindar and our chief choreographer Dmytro Leka. They communicated with parties around the world.

My deputy managing director, sound engineer, and some technical staff went to the front, but I tried to retain our actors because replacing them would make it nearly impossible to recreate the synergy we had developed as a troupe.

Our sewing department, which in normal times sews costumes for the theatre, began to sew items for the military.

Many refugees from Kyiv, Kharkiv, and eastern and southern Ukraine appeared in our city. Some lived in our theatre for a while. Therefore, our actors created a kind of counseling center for refugee children, where they could play, communicate, and spend time.

When theatre becomes more than theatre

We quickly resumed actual theatrical activities. Here is why: A few years ago, we set up a stage in our theatre's large basement, where we played Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*. This basement became a bomb shelter for use during air raids, a time when many people came to us, including displaced persons. I must



Hamlet



Romeo and Juliet

confess that such scenes were very difficult to watch, because everyone there was psychologically traumatized. Among the refugees were pregnant women, women with small children, even people bringing pets. They were all very scared during the air raids, even to the point of sickness. In those first days, therefore, all our theatre employees approached them as

psychologists and tried to calm them down.

Then a thought came to me: Why not risk doing what we know best?

I didn't know what plays would be best to perform for these people. Comedies, for people who have witnessed horror and violence? Tragedies, despite our being surrounded by tragedy ourselves?

But we took that risk, and in early March we put on our first performance. That was *Aeneid*, which is based on a burlesque travesty poem by the Ukrainian writer Ivan Kotlyarevskyi and the first literary work published in modern Ukrainian (in 1798). We next played *Hamlet*, to show our gratitude to the people of Great Britain for their unprecedented support of Ukraine, then *Nation*, based on the works of contemporary Ukrainian writer Maria Mathios.

All doubts about the people's need for theatre evaporated when we read a social networking post by one of our viewers. A woman from Bucha wrote the following:

When the war came and the bombing began, I took my family, my children and hid them all in the basement. I didn't cry then, because I understood that I had no right to cry, that I had to keep calm and strong, that I am responsible for my family's safety. We sat in the basement for a week, afraid to go upstairs because everything outside and on the street had been destroyed by rockets. I didn't cry then, either, because I understood that I had to provide my family with

food, water, and warmth. When I realized it was time to move on, we gathered our belongings and fled our city under bombs. Even then I did not cry, because I understood that I was responsible for my family and had no room for panic. When we arrived in Ivano-Frankivsk, I still did not cry, because I knew I still had many issues to solve, starting with finding housing for my family and children.

But one day, during yet another air raid, I got to watch a performance at the Ivan Franko Theatre. I burst into tears from the first words spoken when the director and actors came

onto the stage and started the play, and I cried through the entire thing, until the last sound of their performance. After that, I felt better. I looked at the world around me and gradually understood what I had to do next, how to continue existing for my family. I didn't miss a single performance after that.

These words really struck us. We once again realized how theatre can be a powerful therapy. Art can accomplish even things professionals cannot. A traumatized person must make the decision to visit a psychologist or psychotherapist and request treatment, and the specialist must seek an individual approach for each patient. But those visiting the theatre can subconsciously "live through" their trauma. They can experience the catharsis that audiences have sought at the theatre for thousands of years, and they can leave cleansed and changed.



On August 22, 2021, before the war began, *Aeneid* was staged on the summit of Mt. Pip Ivan.



Nation Photo: Bohdan Savliuk



People gathered for a performance in a theatre basement bomb shelter. Photo: Bohdan Savliuk

We thus introduced our “Bomb Shelter Theatre” project, and during the whole of March we put on plays in our theatre basement. So far as I know, we were the only theatre in Ukraine that continued its activities from the beginning of the war.

Interestingly, we even managed to provide large-scale performances in our bomb shelter. Before that, I had no idea what unusual content was possible in such a limited space.

As early as April 2022, we returned to our usual theatre format, utilizing five stages. When an air-raid alarm sounded, the show would (and still does) stop. Everyone, both actors and audience, heads for the bomb shelter, waits until the all-clear is given, then returns together to finish the performance.

What to stage during the war, and whether to stage about the war

During the first six months of the war, I found it difficult to read books or watch serious films or plays. But I understood that the theatre must move on and that we theatre people should react to what is happening.

But what should we stage plays about? We had extensive discussions with friends and colleagues who are theatre scholars, and we finally realized that in times like these, it is possible to use what we call the “poster style.” While I love the subtle emotions in Chekhov’s plays and the psychological dramas of Dostoyevsky, these do not work during war, because our world has been reduced to black and white. A style like the unequivocal presentations of propaganda posters is thus better suited.

At that time, the famous Ukrainian composers Roman Grygoriv and Illia Razumeiko, who primarily work in contemporary opera, were at the Theatre. Roman is also a member of the Presidential National Orchestra, so we had the idea of developing a joint project with the Presidential Orchestra, with their musical element (more than fifty musicians) and our cast on stage, and me as

director. We created *Fight for Ukraine* as a performance concert in the poster style, including spiritual Ukrainian and world music, Ukrainian poetry classics by Taras Shevchenko and Vasyl Stefanyk, and Ukrainian military songs.



Fight for Ukraine

This performance presented themes of Ukrainian identity and how Russia had destroyed us in previous centuries. Some very politically incorrect things were often spoken on that stage. But we realized that such was necessary for both us and our audience. That held for both western Ukraine locals and, most interestingly, for refugees from the east and south of the country, within whom a Ukrainian spirit had already sprouted. We realized that they too needed to be able to recognize themselves as Ukrainians. Even in the Russian acculturated east, there are now people who self-identify as Ukrainian. That's pretty cool too. A new Ukrainian nation is arising before our eyes.

I am very reserved about topical drama on subjects related to modern war. I know there have been many readings of Ukrainian authors here and in Europe, and that documentary theatre has become very popular. But I think a certain time should pass so that we can view current events from afar, from a little distance. Right now, only painful reflections are possible, but theatrical art calls for a more refined understanding and artistic generalization.

In the West, everyone is very interested in our reaction to these military events, but I want to prevent Ukrainian art and theatre from being associated solely with war, so that we do not reduce ourselves to war victims, forever crying and bemoaning our fate. We must maintain a higher level of artistic accomplishment.

Our plans regarding Ukraine

Our repertoire of course includes domestic classics. But it so happened that as

director I had never staged a classical Ukrainian work. That is why I want to realize such productions now, but we will of course interpret them from modern perspectives, not in classical presentations.

We have planned premieres of plays by Ukrainian playwrights, including *Sorochintsy Fair* by Hryhoriy Kvitka-Osnovyanenko and *Forest Song* by Lesya Ukrainka. And we will definitely stage comedies! There is no need for avoiding levity. Without doubt, we need to heal the nation, and theatre has proven itself as a powerful therapy. We are currently working on these performances, with premieres scheduled for the end of October and November. Other than that, I am afraid I am not yet at liberty to speak.

After the interview: Marina Kotelenets



Five months have passed since I recorded these interviews. Five months of war. During that time, the Ukrainian theatre had to act as did all Ukrainians throughout our country: to conduct military operations, while at the same time saving lives and everything connected with them.

Theatres have resumed their work to the extent possible, restoring previous performances and even preparing premieres. During this period, many stages in our country presented performances about the war. But audiences, as might be expected, currently prefer “light” performances. Comedies, melodramas, and detective stories have traditionally led box office sales, and such trends have only strengthened during the war. Also, live concerts by orchestras and classical ensembles have suddenly become wildly popular. Many are defiantly held by candlelight, metamorphosing uncertainty regarding the availability of light and electricity (since buildings and entire urban districts can lose power at any time) into an exquisite aesthetic gesture.

But the most important trend today is incredible activity among young Ukrainian playwrights and their incisive, gut reactions to the shocks of war.

Throughout the world today, there is unprecedented interest in our authors.

Readings, performances, and festivals with Ukrainian playwrights and actors are being held all over Europe and in the United States. Collections of their new plays have been released in France and the US.

Texts by today's Ukrainian authors are in many respects journalistic and documentary. They are like transcripts of the lives Ukrainian people are currently experiencing, the trials and travails of ordinary people. Their historical value is undeniable, but farther down the road we will see them flower into great artistic results.

In the meantime, the Ukrainian text that has become best known to the world is Natalia Vorozhbit's *Bad Roads*, which the author wrote in 2017 about the start of the war in eastern Ukraine, which stretches all the way back to 2014.

Kotelenets, Marina

Marina Kotelenets graduated from the Kyiv National I.K. Karpenko-Karyi University of Theatre, Cinema and Television (M.S. Theatre Studies) and the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (M.S. Psychology). Marina worked as an art critic and journalist for Ukrainian publications, then began teaching at her alma mater Karpenko-Karyi University in the Department of Theatre Studies. Since 2011, she also works at the UPO All-Ukrainian League of Authors as an expert in working with theatres and playwrights. Since 2016, she has been director of the All-Ukrainian League of Authors.

(Translation: Tatiana Vernoslov and Tony Gonzalez)