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UKRAINIAN CITIES UNDER RUSSIAN SIEGE/OCCUPATION: THE OPTICS OF UKRAINIAN DRAMATURGY 2022/2023

UKRAIŃSKIE MIASTA POD ROSYJSKIM OBLĘŻENIEM/OKUPACJĄ:
PERSPEKTYWA DRAMATURGII UKRAIŃSKIEJ 2022/2023

ABSTRACT: This article shows how the Ukrainian drama of 2022-2023 captured anthropological realities, symbolic transgressions of time, space, and cartographic perception of Ukrainian cities that were destroyed and where the genocide of the Ukrainian people was committed and for those cities Russia's full-scale aggression became an impetus for resistance and new self-organisation. Therefore, this artistic array of texts is valuable material for anthropological studies on the city in the twenty-first-century wars.



KEYWORDS: Military Anthropology, Russian War on Ukraine, city in conflict drama, urban space, transgressions

ABSTRAKT: Artykuł przedstawia, w jaki sposób ukraiński dramat w latach 2022–2023 uchwycił realia historyczne z symbolicznym przekroczeniem czasu, przestrzeni jak i kartograficznym postrzeganiem ukraińskich miast w zmiennych realiach pełzającej linii frontu, okupacji, oblężenia itd., dla których rosyjska agresja w roku 2022 stała się czynnikiem determinującym czynny opór oraz nową samoorganizację społeczności w stanie wojny, a także miast, które zostały zniszczone i w których dokonano ludobójstwa narodu ukraińskiego. Dlatego ten artystyczny wachlarz tekstów jest cennym materiałem do badań antropologicznych nad miastem w czasie wojen XXI wieku.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: antropologia wojskowa, rosyjska wojna na Ukrainie, miasto w konflikcie, przestrzeń miejska, transgresje

INTRODUCTION

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“Name me a city, and I will tell you where its wound is,” wrote the Ukrainian poet Kateryna Mikhalitsyna in her poem “Map of Alarms” in the spring of 2022.¹ There are no such cities in Ukraine that do not have their wounds. But how exactly did the Ukrainian cities directly affected by the war, like Kyiv, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel, and Mariupol, survive the first months of full-scale Russian aggression? How have the values and feelings of the citizens changed? What has happened to their everyday life, and what new reflection formats have emerged against this background?

Ukrainian literary critic Hanna Uliura in her book *Writing War* emphasised the global differences in the concepts of “writing *about* war” and “writing war,” preferring the second approach, which allows capturing in literary texts what cannot be created by the artist's imagination; through the comparison of literary texts devoted to various modern wars, Ukrainian humanities scholars quickly had the opportunity to “rationalise the horror, to give a system to something that is not subject to ordering,” and at the same time “each individual event-tragedy is not cancelled or devalued in this way but relativised. They were and remain unique, plus they become metaphors”.²

Researchers of contemporary Ukrainian literature about the new phase of Russia's attack on Ukraine point out that the “language of war” is spoken in “voices” and “every detail, even a cup of unfinished tea, has its voice”³ that the poetic comprehension of the war encourages poets to “decorate the leading motifs with intertextual references”⁴ and “carefully record individual memorable fragments that gradually fill the pages of the national archive”⁵; and in fiction, on the contrary, there is “a sense of continuity based on the past and the memory of it, individual and collective”.⁶ The situation with drama is quite different, as it is a rather specific intermedial plane of texts that, under the conditions of time, space, and reduction of

¹ К. Міхаліцина, Карта тривоги <https://inkyiv.com.ua/2022/06/poeziya-voiennoi-dobi-nazvi-meni-misto/> (Дата звернення 26.12.2023).

² Г. Улюра, Писати війну, Київ: Темпора, 2023, с.6-7.

³ Г. Клименко, Поезія мовою війни, In *Війна і література. Збірник наукових праць*. Черкаси: Видавець Юлії Чабаненко, 2023, с.1.

⁴ О. Гальчук, Провідні мотиви й образи поетичної книги Павла Вишебаби «Тільки не пиши мені про війну», In *Літературний процес: методологія, імена, тенденції. Збірник наукових праць*, 2023, №22, с.18.

⁵ Т. Белімова, Пам'ять про війну в поезії: англomовний та український контексти. In *“Літати небом. Жити на Землі”. Геопоетичні стратегії” сучасних літературознавчих досліджень*, Бердянськ, БДПУ, 2023, с.21.

⁶ Л. Кавун, Тема пам'яті й тотожності в сучасній українській прозі. In *Синопис: текст, контекст, медіа: Збірник наукових праць*, 2023, №29(1), с.5.

the author's voice, must create such “living stories” that recipients will not question that will inspire trust and instant reaction.

Contemporary Ukrainian drama is becoming a unique aesthetic base of texts whose authors, in a rather specific way, seek answers to urgent axiological and anthropological questions actualised by the Great War⁷, record their reflections, and interpret the direct speech of eyewitnesses and witnesses. Given that drama is designed to embody voices and “bring thoughts to life” and is a unique format of operational verbalisation, its extreme experience can serve anthropological research by capturing anthropologically significant details and meanings that cannot be captured in other texts about the war.

In capturing the fleeting routine that coexists with daily tragedies, playwrights primarily use the ability of writing to organise the personal space of its creator, “Sometimes we write to talk through things we can't say out loud. We may have feelings or experiences that we cannot express directly. Writing allows us to create metaphors (one thing changing or reflecting another) and allows us to express the incomprehensible”.⁸ Accordingly, many drama pieces about the new perception of war were created in the spring of 2022, which often broke the traditional form of dramatic art but preserved significant testimonies and engraved transgressions.

In this essay, we will not consider the entire body of drama texts about the war, but only those that explore the anthropological space of the Ukrainian city during the war in one way or another, which is about 100 drama pieces written chiefly in 2022.

NEW PERCEPTION OF THE MAP OF UKRAINE

Often, this space is denoted exclusively by the names of cities as concepts, the mere mention of which is enough to instantly create a whole imaginary space (“word-cities”: listing them vaguely resembles Homer's “catalogue of ships”), and these names for Ukrainians after February 24, 2022, are no longer just internal geography, but they carry additional semantic connotations, denoting anthropological and emotional systems that are understandable to

⁷ The period of the Russian invasion of February 24, 2022, began to be called the Great War in Ukraine. This symbolic understanding of the new stage of Russian aggression became entrenched in the public consciousness of Ukrainians after the liberation of Kyiv, Sumy, Chernihiv, and partially Kharkiv regions from the Russians in the spring of 2022. In Ukrainian culture, this is an almost permanent phrase that not only gives the current war the features of both previous world wars of the twentieth century, but also shows that in our optics it is not a local military conflict, but a much larger event.

⁸ Р. Кеппс, Як писати про війну. Київ: Смолоскип, 2021, с.12.

most and silenced for the uninitiated, “I whisper these words before falling asleep. Mariupol. Bucha. Hostomel. Irpin. Vasylkiv. Sumy. Okhtyrka. Chernihiv. Iziium. Popasna. Volnovakha. Kharkiv. Kherson. Mykolaiv... These are word cities; they are home to all the people who died, who went missing, who were left homeless. This is my geography now. I don't know what will happen next. I don't know the street sparrows, nor do my friends. But I am sure of one thing – we will not forget anything. Everything that happened. Never. We will remember the bone and the blood. To the calluses and holes. To the sparrow's sky”.⁹

Thus, in Andriy Bondarenko's drama *Survivor's Syndrome*, the word cities from the internal geography of the country turns into an extensive internal emotional map of both the author of the text, the narrator, a participant in the events, and its potential recipients. The drama seems to embrace and revitalise this imaginary map, and the initiate knows precisely what happened to these cities and their people against the backdrop of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Moreover, some of these wounds remain open today, which, in the current sound of similar texts, gives specific toponyms additional tragedy and adds them to the catalogue of marking places of current and future memorial practices of Ukrainian society.

In *The Chronicles of the Lost Soul*¹⁰, Anna Halas catalogues Ukrainian cities not arbitrarily but according to several clear principles: colour changes on the online map of air alerts in Ukraine (Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa - regional centres in different parts of the country); the first stories about Russian atrocities on the occupied Ukrainian land (Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel); targeted missile attacks on Ukrainian civilians in places of naturally large gatherings (Kramatorsk – a missile hit on the railway station where people were boarding an evacuation train); the wiping out of an entire Ukrainian city along with its inhabitants (Mariupol). This play is included in *Anthology 24*, published in the first half of 2022, as a kind of dramatic “event map”¹¹ of the first months of the full-scale invasion. In her play *Not About That Raccoon*, Iryna Harets tracks which Russian missiles are hitting Ukrainian cities while her characters are driving their car from Kyiv to their summer cottage in the countryside and her “catalogue of hits” includes Kyiv, Lviv, Zaporizhzhia, Sumy, Chernihiv, Zhytomyr, Odesa, Rivne, Vinnytsia, Kovel, Kryvyi Rih, Khmelnytsky, Ivano-Frankivsk, Poltava, and Ternopil: cities are included in the catalogue according to the progression of information about the hits on their objects and

⁹ А. Бондаренко, Синдром вцілілого https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/sites/default/files/texts/sindrom-vcililogo_andriy-bondarenko.pdf (access 30.05.2023).

¹⁰ Also known as *The Chronicles of an Evacuated Body and a Lost Soul*.

¹¹ Антологія 24 <https://paradefest.com.ua/anthology24/#intro> (access 23.02.2023).

people. Kherson, which was occupied then, was also included in the catalogue due to a report that the occupiers had stolen a raccoon from the local zoo and were abusing it. The author compresses various information waves in one play as if condensing time: here we have reports of 566 miners trapped in a mine in Kryvyi Rih after a missile attack, and of trains being stopped in many directions, and even of a “missile falling on the territory of Poland, killing two people”¹². In the drama *100 Days*, Eleonora Tymoshenko ranks the regions of Ukraine by the number of air raid alerts and the total duration of these alerts in the first hundred days after February 24, building a kind of time hierarchy in which Luhansk region wins, where the alerts lasted almost non-stop. In *Parts of Our Body*, Alex Wood mentions different Ukrainian cities as a link to the micro-stories she heard of people fleeing Russian missiles: Chernihiv, Kyiv, Bila Tserkva, Kamianets, Pervomaisk, Kherson, Lviv, Iziium, Mariupol, Zaporizhzhia, Nikolske, Rozivka, Berdiansk, Kupiansk. Poltava, Kremenchuk, Ternopil. In such catalogues, the notions of centre and periphery, west and east, north and south, big cities and small towns are erased, and each name becomes a point of pain or a place of human solidarity.

Reflections on invasion in Ihor Bilyts's play *Knocking on the Door* are devoid of geographical specificity, in which the very metaphor of invasion is conveyed through metonymic allusions related to physiologically felt violations of the human body's boundaries and the penetration of strangers into its organs: the strangers are stuck in the throat and make it impossible to scream; they penetrate the skin and seem to tear it off a living person; they deform the psyche, convincing the person that he or she has dissolved into the occupiers; they unwittingly turn a person into an instrument of cruel revenge, in which every death of a stranger becomes almost a physiological pleasure for the avenger, “I ran, I cut the enemy with me, one and the other, a legion more. I penetrated them like jelly. And their intestines were still dragging after me a little bit. Nice, warm blood washed my tense face. Pieces of meat fell off from sharp movements. Oh, it's such a delight. Try it”¹³. An initiated reader will recognise the unnamed Kramatorsk train station, a street in Bucha, border villages in Chernihiv or Sumy regions in the text by specific sketches of other people's crimes; for the uninitiated reader, even without geographical localisations, the receptive pain and bitterness will be enough – and the catharsis of the final feeling of being alive and able to create, despite everything.

¹² І. Гарець, Не про Єнота <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/play/ne-pro-yenota> (access 29.08.2023).

¹³ І. Білиць, Стукіт у двері <http://kurbas.org.ua/news/nenazvana-viuna/13.pdf> (access 29.08.2023).

The playwrights capture how many Ukrainians, during the full-scale invasion, developed a desire to see the cities and towns of Ukraine that they had never visited after the war was over. As a result, new catalogues of cities are being compiled, unlike the ones we started with. Ukrainian towns are being positioned as more attractive than luxurious European/world capitals in the future, “Writing this piece, I realised that I have a new dream: to go to Siverskyi Donets and look at water lilies from Saltov, where I will go instead of Prague, through Chuhuiv, where I will go instead of Oslo, through the destroyed Izium, I will go to instead of California, through Rubizhne, where I will go instead of Barcelona, to Lysychansk, where I will go instead of Nancy, and to Severodonetsk, to Luhansk and Donetsk, where I will go instead of Berlin. – Even if the cities are no more and only water lilies are left. I dream of sailing along my favourite river in the east. I dream of feeling the joy of flowering again. When I travel, I will pinch a piece of water lily rhizome, dry it, and put it in my pocket. This flower, like a reflection of the sun, a reflection of my heart, will protect me wherever I go. Strange dreams during the war”¹⁴ (Olha Matsiupa, *Flowering*).

As we can see, the geographical map of the war for Ukrainians is rapidly transforming into either a “map of alerts”, a catalogue of genocidal crimes against civilians or a program for the future “rediscovery” of their own country.

TRANSGRESSIVE MOVEMENT OF MEANINGS: RE-LINING THE VERTICAL

The playwrights of the war have the time transgressions acquire surreal signs of irreversible transformation, modification of the chronological countdown when the dates of days and names of months lose their meaning because time is perceived as an endless extension of the morning of February 24. For example, Oleh Mykhailov titles one of his drama pieces *41 Days (of February)*. In Anna Halas's play *The Chronicles of the Lost Soul*, “on February sixty-four, the body woke up later than on previous mornings, “the body lost all its settings and found it difficult to keep track of the days”.¹⁵

In the dramaturgical topography of Ukrainian cities, the war before all significantly transforms the symbolic vertical.

¹⁴ О. Мацюпа, Цвітіння. <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/play/tsvitinnya> (access 13.10.2023).

¹⁵ А. Галас, Хроніки евакуйованого тіла і загубленої душі <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/sites/default/files/texts/khroniki-zagublenoi-dushi.pdf> (access 29.08.2023).

The sky carries threats and constant danger due to artillery shelling, rocket attacks, and air raids, which is documented in several plays (*Air Alert* by Dan Humennyi; *Closed Sky* by Neda Nezhdana; *Give Me a Taste of the Sun* by Oleksandr Miroshnychenko; *The Chronicles of the Lost Soul* by Anna Halas; *Methodology* by Julia Gonchar; *(Na)diya* (eng. “hope”) by Iryna Serebryakova; *I Want to Go Home* by Oksana Savchenko; *24 Hours (of February 24)* by Nina Zakhozhenko; *A** by Iryna Bezchetnova; *Call Them by Their Names* by Tetyana Kytsenko; and *Oncorashka* (Translator’s note: “onco-” stands for “oncological disease” and “rashka” stands for “Russia”); and *Not About That Raccoon* by Iryna Harets). At the same time, it doesn't matter which Ukrainian city the characters are physically located in because the threat from the sky exists everywhere. For example, in Iryna Harets's play *Not About That Raccoon*, daughters from Lviv write to their parents on social media, “The siren went off. We're heading for cover; “We just managed to pick up the young one from kindergarten... We planned on picking up Vera in the evening, as usual. The teachers will take them down to the shelter now”.¹⁶

The earthly level of life loses its features of habitability and orderliness, even though playwrights are trying to at least somehow capture and record the anthropology of their civilian characters' everyday lives at this level. In this regard, the desire of the citizens during the intense Russian attacks on Ukrainian critical infrastructure in the fall and winter of 2022 to focus not on threats but on small everyday details that seem entirely unnecessary, sometimes even absurd, between the extended blackouts, the destruction of water pipes, and the lack of telephone communication, but which seem to keep the big city in order and the appearance of a familiar rhythm. We remember how quickly Ukrainian businesses adapted to the new reality, how generators started running in cities, how cafes and theatres worked by candlelight, and how shopping malls stopped escalators between floors, closed cinemas, and switched to economical LED lighting attached to the walls with tape. In her play *Methodology*, Yulia Gonchar tries to capture the rhythms of life in such a threatened city (from the proper names she gives, we understand that it is Kyiv), through her medical history (in the DILA medical laboratory, despite everything, you can get tested and get the results quickly), through aimless visits to shops and large shopping centres (Auchan, Lavina Mall, Karavan, and some cafes and cafeterias continue to operate), through strange household purchases for such times (“we bought hangers from JYSK”), and finally, through the behaviour of people who are removed from the

¹⁶ І. Гарець, Не про Єнота <https://paradefest.com.ua/anthology24/#intro> (access 29.08.2023).

main narrative (the owner of the café, “calm, confident,” impresses the narrator with a cup of “tiny espresso”, which he calmly drinks to the distant sound of strong explosions). But at the end of this short piece, the author explains the distant sounds of explosions: “And now we come down from heaven to earth. This is the site of the arrival of one of the Russian missiles in Kyiv, where three people died, according to Mayor Klychko. Among them are a 17-year-old girl who was crossing the road at the time of the explosion, a minibus driver who was in the car a meter away from the explosion, and a railway station worker [...]”.¹⁷

Similarly, on the earthly level, in ordinary Ukrainian homes, portals of mortal threat appear. The zoning of living space is considered exclusively in the coordinates of relative safety, as in Olga Matsyupa's play *Modus imperativus*, where simple names of parts of an apartment for Ukrainians during a foreign language lesson in a safe European country become triggers for a spontaneous traumatic reaction of the psyche, “The wall... How do you stop evaluating a room regarding the possibility of a missile hit? How can we stop thinking about all words in imperative form if sometimes only specific actions can save lives? In case of an air raid, hide between the load-bearing walls; “The ceiling... If the ceiling falls on your head, think there is a blue sky above the ceiling, dotted with velvet stars, because they are important, as well as the moral order in the person themselves; “The window... You have to tape it up. This way, there is a chance that a shard will not get into the throat, for example, or into the eye; “The corridor... is a piece of safety in the air between the load-bearing walls. If there are explosions and you are terrified, pray or meditate, it helps, or write to your ex, or confess your love, maybe this is your last chance if you have not had the courage yet, or curse the enemy”.¹⁸

For those who have left the country, the news that Kyiv may be stormed comes as a shock, as they worry about the fate of their loved ones, as in Oksana Savchenko's play *V Den* (or *On the Day*), “When I write these lines, there is information that Kyiv will be stormed. My parents and the person I love are in Kyiv [...]”.¹⁹

The drama records how underground space in Ukrainian cities and towns instantly becomes the centre of concentration of life and closed zones of relative safety. This did not occur in texts about the Russian aggression from 2014 to February 2022. In the plays of the previous period of the war, basements served as torture zones for people with pro-Ukrainian

¹⁷ Ю. Гончар, Методичка <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/play/metodychka> (access 29.08.2023).

¹⁸ О. Мацюпа, *Modus imperativus* <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/play/modus-imperativus> (access 29.08.2023).

¹⁹ О. Савченко, *В ден* <https://ukrdramahub.blogspot.com/p/24-2020.html> (access 11.05.2022).

views in the territories occupied by the Russians (*Pussycat in Memory of Darkness* by Neda Nezhdana; *Chestnut and the Lily of the Valley* by Oleh Mykolaychuk; *Bad Roads* by Natalka Vorozhbyt). In *Bad Roads*, however, there is a single reference to the fact that in the frontline “grey zone”, a grandmother and granddaughter occasionally go to the shelter when there are very powerful explosions nearby. Still, they have no warnings of the potential danger and, when they hear explosions, they argue languidly about whether to go home or to the shelter.²⁰

The main semantic accents of the characters' daily lives after February 24, 2022, are actively moving into the space of the underground, which is traditionally considered pre-human, chthonic in culture. The drama records how this space is rapidly “mastered”, “appropriated,” and “humanised” by individuals, as well as by quantitatively and qualitatively different human groups. Thus, the topos of the hiding place/bomb shelter becomes one of the defining models of stage space organisation for civilian Ukrainians (“Strangely, we started saying «as usual» to the process of hiding in a bomb shelter”²¹, Oleksandr Viter's characters in the play *Unexpectedly Quiet* state). In the playwrights' texts, we see different alienations of shelters: a warehouse in the basement of a large enterprise in Mariupol (*The Trumpeter* by Inna Honcharova), the basement of the Mariupol Drama Theater, where women with children are hiding (*Mariupol Drama* by Oleksandr Havrosh), the basement of an apartment building in the Kyiv region (*A Topol-M Rocket Fired at a Cat Named Brooch* by Lena Lagushonkova), or a small one-story house in Kyiv (*Oaks, Holding The Sky* by Liudmyla Tymoshenko), an apartment building corridor that serves as a temporary shelter for the characters (*Five Stories about Friends and Foes* by Iryna Serebryakova), a bomb shelter with a flickering light (*Vino* by Natalia Ignatieva), the basement of a market (*Parts of Our Body* by Alex Wood), a damp and cold basement that is not at all suitable for shelter (*I Want to Stop* by Natalia Blok), a Kyiv subway station (*Parts of Our Body* by Alex Wood), a Kharkiv subway station turned into a large shelter (*Me, War and Toy Grenade* by Nina Zakhochenko; *Cosmonauts* by Iryna Beschetnova), the basement of a private house in Irpin (*I'm OK* by Nina Zakhochenko), the basement of an ordinary village house filled with home preservation (*When This Day Is Over* by Iryna Feofanova), an

²⁰ Н. Ворожбит, *Погані дороги*. Львів: Видавництво Анетти Антоненко, 2021.

²¹ О. Вітер, *Несподівано тихо*

<https://www.dramaworld.pp.ua/%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B4%D1%96%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%85%D0%BE?fbclid=IwAR0VpMcmI5kU7HDNGqBgEaKsf0S5Ru5bTH0me5IRJPgEI2yCWClaeJKGtqg> (access 14.05.2023).

underground shelter in Chernihiv (*Turi-Ruri* by Yulia Nechai), a dark enclosed space without windows, doors, or other areas of contact, read as a space of traumatic memory (*Closed Sky* by Neda Nezhdana), the bomb shelter of an old school in Mykolaiv (*In the Bowels of Earth* by Olena Hapicieva), the basement of a school in the occupied territory (*The Vertep*²² by Artem Lebedev)²³, a shelter in a Lviv theater (*The Role* by Oleksiy Minko), etc. In other words, the space of the bomb shelter becomes one of the archetypal topos and a marker of the new reality and the new collective trauma of Ukrainians. On one hand, it provides a temporary sense of shelter and relative safety while at the same time reshaping all the usual ideas about what a person needs in life; on the other hand, it poses many existential challenges and activates emotional and bodily reactions that sometimes seem too demonstrative.

It is paradoxical that such a descent into the depths of a large number of people of all ages, their prolonged stay together in a confined space, inspires an explosion of delving into their families' ancestral and transgenerational memory.

And now, let's think about the dramaturgical landscapes of the war in Ukrainian cities with different fates – Kyiv and Mariupol.

Kyiv: Urbi et Orby

Russia's intention to take Kyiv “in 3 days” has removed from the Ukrainian public arena the artificially imposed question of Ukraine as a decentralised territory with “first,” “second,” and “third” capitals (Kyiv, Lviv, and Kharkiv), so Kyiv naturally appears in the drama of the war as the only sacred centre that Ukrainians cannot allow falling: that is why the Kyiv agglomeration takes the brunt of the hellish blows, in whose orbit the tragedies of Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel, and other cities, towns, and villages on the routes to Kyiv measure not only the existential price of Ukraine's very existence and the survival of the unconquered Ukrainian capital but also the world's attitude to the war in Ukraine.

The drama interprets and modernises the ancient and medieval topos of a besieged fortress city, which emphasises the aerial level of threat/death (missiles, bombs, enemy aircraft, the air raid signal itself from speakers located high on poles), the earthly level of

²² The Ukrainian Christmas tradition of the nativity story and other mystery plays presented through portable puppet theater and drama.

²³B. Ben, Meet the vertep, a baroque Ukrainian Christmas tradition revived amid Russia's war <https://euromaidanpress.com/2023/02/01/authentic-18th-century-ukrainian-christmas-tradition-vertep-reconstructed-and-performed-in-ukraine-despite-war/> (access 14.01.2024).

sacrifice, involvement in defence and precise identification of friends/foes, as well as the underground level of rescue (basements, hiding places, shelters, metro stations) and the formation of a new community of solidarity, trust and mutual assistance. In such a topos, many Ukrainians metaphorically dive deeper, working through and talking through long-standing collective traumas, actualising the history of their family, recalling the stories of their grandparents who survived not only the previous world wars but also the Holodomor, Bolshevik repressions, deportations, and forced Russification.

In Liudmyla Tymoshenko's play *Oaks, Holding the Sky*, before the war, very different families live in a two-story house in the centre of Kyiv, separated, quarrelling, and getting in each other's way. Hiding in the basement during the first shelling, these people not only become a big "family" but also begin to plan their tomorrow and joint projects around their home, which they should learn to love and appreciate.

In the dramatic texts of 2022, Kyiv appears as a harsh, masculine city of defenders, which everyone, regardless of age, is ready to defend – all those lefts. The protagonist of Volodymyr Serdiuk's play *Am I Too Old for War?* an elderly man with experience in the Soviet army also wants to defend the capital, but there are so many volunteers that older men are sent home.

We can read about the defence lines deployed around the perimeter of Kyiv in Nina Zakhochenko's *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* and Maksym Kurochkin's *Three Attempts to Improve Daily Life*. In the first text, two young gay men are on duty at a checkpoint at the entrance to Kyiv, and the unfolding of such a discourse shows that Ukraine has made significant progress in understanding personal freedom and tolerance. Moreover, the guys are not afraid to speak out loud about their orientation, and one dares to remark to his supervisor ("I went up to him and spoke. I am asking you not to use hate speech against the gay community about the enemy because it offends the gay community that is defending our country and wants to live in it freely and openly")²⁴, and the defence of Kyiv is as high a calling for them as for every other man in their unit. In the second case, the line of defence is somewhat distant from Kyiv, and the playwright shows how those who never thought they would have to wear military uniforms get used to war. Thus, the narrator constantly sees his recently killed comrade-in-arms next to him, and he is looking for internal resources to accept the new reality, "An hour ago, I found a way to come to terms with what was happening. I sat down on the ground, not the way the military

²⁴ Н. Захоженко, Не питай, не кажи <https://ukrdramahub.blogspot.com/p/24-2020.html> (access 11.05.2022).

teaches. I sat down like the woman in Andrew Wyeth's famous painting, except I kept my back straight and rested my hand on my submachine gun. Now, I see everything in the world, not just my sector. I'm ready for whatever is to come. The voices in my head are finally silent. I sit under a tree, cut off the acacia branches I can reach, and stick them in the ground. It's rational, camouflage, and increases my chances of being the first to shoot. This is the pinnacle of my ambition now"²⁵.

The internal topos of the besieged city (a kind of new Troy, which, as we remember, was under siege for 10 years) is also striking, in which all that is "human" manifests itself associatively through instant memories, smells, and forgotten tastes (for example, through the smell and taste of freshly ground coffee). In the playwright's text of *Gamardjoba* by Volodymyr Serdiuk, the action takes place in besieged Kyiv, in a small bar where they still make natural coffee because other places have long since run out of it, like other products: in the monologue of the elderly protagonist, we learn that he was finally accepted into the city's territorial defence reserve and that, realising the danger of Russia's creeping aggression, he volunteered to fight in Georgia back in 2008, and now he knows that foreign volunteers, including Georgian volunteer battalions, are standing alongside our soldiers at the front.

Playwrights look for eloquent micro-details to capture the resilience of Kyiv residents in a besieged city under constant shelling. For example, in Oksana Grytsenko's play *How Not to Be a Katsap*²⁶, the heroine tells how, in the first week of the full-scale invasion, having fled to Romania, she receives an unexpected call from the Kyiv registry office, where she was supposed to sign a marriage license with her boyfriend, something she had completely forgotten about in the wake of the events of the last days of February 2022. The woman says that tomorrow she will not be able to sign the marriage license because the registry office was shelled, but she promises to fulfill this mission as soon as everything is settled – and she has no doubt about it. In response, the heroine's boyfriend said that the registry office worker was a "woman of steel with a temper"²⁷, and the heroine herself was prompted by this call to think about returning to Kyiv and eventually returning in a month.

²⁵ М. Курочкін, Три спроби покращити побут <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/sites/default/files/texts/pobut-2023.pdf> (access 17.05.2023).

²⁶ a derogatory colloquial name for Russians used by Ukrainians and Poles

²⁷ О. Гриценко, Як не стати кацапом <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/play/yak-ne-staty-katsapom> (access 29.08.2023).

In the image of the besieged Kyiv, we have exciting projections on the literary Robinson. For example, in the play *Robinson* by Vitaliy Chesky, a man who remains in besieged Kyiv does not join the ranks of its defenders but helps civilians, for example, move things to basements; he goes down to subway stations, becoming a chronicler of what people do and how they reflect, “The subway is now the realm of Hades. The river of sorrow, the Acheron, has frozen over, and they have put up trains on it so that souls can rest in them. The train runs only to the Styx at intervals of one hour. Comforted by my simple metaphor, I take the usual pose of an inner snob”²⁸. In the play *The Post-war Scenario* by Kostyantyn Soloviyenko, a homeless man from the capital unites with his, also homeless friends for a noble cause: to supply empty bottles to those who make Molotov cocktails.

Creativity is perceived as an indispensable support point for the artists who remained in Kyiv. In Volodymyr Serdyuk's play *Pressure Level, Pulse Rate*, a Kyiv-based creative family reflects on when the world went crazy, either on February 24, two thousand twenty-two or on February 23, two thousand fourteen, while discussing the next playwriting competition to which they can submit a play about pressure. In Oleksandr Myroshnychenko's play *Unexpectedly Quiet*, the characters in the basement of a bomb shelter try to write themselves and their new identity caused by the war from scratch because everything that came before suddenly loses its meaning. This allows the author to talk not so much about the war itself as about the new semantic planes of Ukrainian culture activated by it, which is involved in the formation of modern civic identity and, after the start of full-scale aggression, begins to work actively in the field of self-awareness, memory, and collective trauma.

Kyiv, as a city that is the semantic and political centre of Ukraine in its resistance to the Russian aggressor, is becoming, at the same time, a space for global rethinking and desacralisation of Russia. We read these meanings in the preface to the virtual collection *Without Them* by the Playwrights Theater, which opened in the summer of 2022 in the capital's Podil district. Maksym Kurochkin, one of its founders and inspirers, wrote in this preface, “The “Rashists”²⁹ missile shot down over Kyiv on November 17 had a dummy nuclear charge on it— a life-size one. Kyiv is probably the first city in the world to receive such a greeting. Everything that is first is remembered forever. Let's remember. A giant model of the country is trying to

²⁸ В. Ченський, Робінзон <https://ukrdrama.ui.org.ua/en/play/robinson> (access 16.05.2023).

²⁹ Rashists (or Orcs) is a term made from two words, «fascist» and «Russian», that is used to describe a totalitarian regime that has been formed in Russia under the leadership of dictator Vladimir Putin.

destroy us. It is made realistically, with moving parts and lights in the models of buildings inhabited by real people and covered with natural snow. In the warm caves, there are real paper books on the shelves, which until recently helped to imitate great literature. The books contain stuffed animals of feelings, twisted shadows of historical events, and skillful imitations of bold thought. There are screens with false heads. Real water flows from the taps, and kitchens prepare something resembling real food. The dummy wants us not to exist. Because if we are here, everyone can see it is a fake. We must dissect the cadaver. It's an unpleasant job. But it is necessary".³⁰

And one more small detail: the beginning of Russian aggression in playwrights' interpretations changes not only the space of Ukrainian cities but also physically very distant urban spaces. For example, Liudmyla Tymoshenko, in her play *Hocus-Pocus*, emphasizes that "in the Armenian city of Spitak there was a square named after Yanukovich³¹. Now this square is named after Serhiy Nigoyan³²» (one of the fallen defenders of the Ukrainian Maidan of 2013-2014). Although this renaming occurred before the full-scale invasion, the artistic consciousness seems to have pushed it back in time. It combines and interconnects the events, putting them into a given war framework.

KYIV AGGLOMERATION: ON THE SHIELD

The playwrights, drawing parallels between the Maidan of 2013-2014, which was surrounded by the pro-Russian Berkut³³, and the rashists-encircled Kyiv in February-March 2022, demonstratively build a connection between these events and emphasise that former Maidan defenders stand up for the capital to prevent tank columns from breaking through into the city: for example, in Oleh Mykolaychuk's play *The Hoarse Voice of Silence*, one of the Maidan heroes is seriously wounded in the battles for Makariv near Kyiv, and the other is killed on March 20, 2022, while holding back a column of enemy tanks from advancing on Kyiv in the Chernihiv region.

In general, Ukrainian playwrights pay a lot of attention to how spontaneous resistance was organised by the Ukrainian military and local self-defence volunteers, but above all by

³⁰ М. Курочкін, Передмова до збірки «Без них» <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/collection/bez-nykh> (access 24.08.2023).

³¹ 4th president of Ukraine; during his presidency Maidan, also known as Revolution of Dignity, took place.

³² Л. Тимошенко, Моя Тара https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/sites/default/files/texts/4_moya-tara.docx .pdf (access 30.05.2023).

³³ A former police unit in the structure of the MIA of Ukraine.

ordinary civilian Ukrainians around Kyiv, wherever the aggressor's troops were advancing, both in terms of actual, physical confrontation and at the level of moral resistance and community consolidation.

Resistance itself begins with the realisation of the final destruction of all previous foundations (*My Tara* by Liudmyla Tymoshenko; *Peace and Tranquility* by Andriy Bondarenko). The narrator of Liudmyla Tymoshenko's play is looking for at least some support for her emotions about the beginning of a full-scale war in the previous culture. The book *Gone with the Wind* comes to mind, "I was not prepared for the sounds of the rockets that went flying at five in the morning on February 24th at Kyiv. I was unprepared for the sound of the air raid siren outside my Kyiv apartment window. I was not prepared for the fact that my mother spent eight days in the occupied city of Irpin without water, gas, electricity, or mobile phone service under shelling until she was evacuated. But most of all, I was not prepared for the fact that several shells exploded 300 meters from my grandmother's house in Ovruch, where my father Viktor now lives. The neighbours' houses were destroyed to the ground, part of the roof of my childhood home was blown off, and windows were blown out. My father called me and told me, 'Lyuda, listen to this sound.' It was the sound of boarding up the windows of my Tara with boards and cardboard. It was the real sound of the end, for which I was not ready"³⁴.

Many Ukrainian playwrights record how and why people outside of Kyiv did not leave their homes or how fleeing either from Kyiv or, say, Bucha, they found themselves back in the epicentre of the war. And this is where the character's motivations and arguments are very different. For example, the nurse Alevtina from the play *The Cross* by Tetyana Kytsenko, living near Kyiv and working in the capital, trusted the official information channels and failed to think about her safety and the evacuation of her loved ones in time, "But they tell us on TV that our soldiers are successfully fighting back, everything will be fine, everything will be fine... So, on March 7, I went to work for two days because the commute was bad on the seventh and eighth. And on the 8th, Tolia called and said, «Tanks are in the village». And that was it. We did not have time to escape...".³⁵ The contrast between actual events and the state media deception called "The United Telethon"³⁶ (*War, Kitchen and Eight Strangers* by Iryna Feofanova) is

³⁴ Л. Тимошенко, Моя Тара [https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/sites/default/files/texts/4_moya-tara.docx .pdf](https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/sites/default/files/texts/4_moya-tara.docx.pdf) (access 30.05.2023).

³⁵ Т. Киценко, Хрест <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/play/khrest> (access 29.08.2023).

³⁶ An information telethon launched on February 24, 2022, to inform the public about the situation in Ukraine since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

recorded by the playwrights almost as a crime of the Ukrainian authorities against their people, who could have survived and been saved if they had been warned in time and if the state institutions had taken responsibility for the evacuation. However, some of the drama's characters also did not leave consciously. For example, the 75-year-old protagonist of Tetyana Kytsenko's play *Baba Toma*³⁷ decides that she has nothing left to lose, so she gains the trust of the occupiers in the Brovary district of Kyiv region, even feeds them, and at the same time learns about their positions and turns them into the local, territorial defence forces.

In her drama *Borsch. My Great-Grandmother's Recipe for Survival*, against the backdrop of the occupation and the attempts of Ukrainian people to survive it, Maryna Smilyanets makes three recipes of borsch “from nothing” in the occupied territories the focus of her play, and it is not just about food, but about the mental “borsch code.” Two of these recipes are from the Kyiv region, and one is from the Chernihiv region. As always, in Ukrainian villages, people are accompanied by their animals. For the characters in the play, who cannot leave their animals to fend for themselves, the decision to stay in their homes and not flee the occupation is often linked to this responsibility for their pets.

In Olha Annenko's drama *Love-me-don't-leave-me*, the protagonist, a Ukrainian refugee in France, loses contact with her son. This twenty-year-old IT specialist has stayed in Kyiv to volunteer while waiting to be drafted into the Ukrainian army, and in the meantime travels around the villages of Kyiv region as an animal volunteer and rescues abandoned animals. When her son's phone finally comes on, a strange male voice tells the woman that her son's car was run over by a Russian tank in Dymerka.

Nina Zakhochenko writes about the life of teenagers in Irpin during the first days of the occupation in her play *I'm OK*. This is a magnificent youth play, designed for any adult audience, which will touch the hearts of young people, which is very important for us now. Paradoxically, the short slang phrase “I'm OK” begins to compensate for the lack of long answers in communication and simultaneously means only one thing, “I'm still alive.” Through students' social media communications, we learn that they also spontaneously join the resistance, for example, by coming together despite the danger and making Molotov cocktails (“1/3 oil. 2/3 gasoline. Rag. Cork. Scotch tape. Thirty beer bottles. The best thing that happened to me in this war”).³⁸ Some of them manage to get out of the occupied city in one way or another. By their

³⁷ Eng. “*grandma Toma*”.

³⁸ Н. Захоженко, Я норм <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/play/ya-norm> (access 13.04.2023).

car, along the green corridor, on foot to Kyiv “through the destroyed city, the destroyed bridge, the bombed road,” and some died throwing Molotov cocktails at the occupiers... The difficult evacuation of civilian Ukrainians from the occupied Kyiv region becomes the material for other dramatic texts, such as *My Mother's a Noob* by Liudmyla Tymoshenko; *War, Kitchen, and Eight Strangers*; and *When This Day Ends* by Iryna Feofanova.

In Iryna Feofanova's play *The Outlander*³⁹, a young mother with two small children escapes occupied Bucha and goes to her aunt in Kalynivka, where she faces the war. Together with other villagers, she stops a column of Russian tanks moving toward Kyiv with Molotov cocktails, becoming a folk heroine for the villagers.

The mere mention of Bucha on the Ukrainian-European border in Natalka Vorozhbyt's play *Green Corridors* depresses the border guards to the point where they don't even check her documents but let her through silently.

In Oksana Hrytsenko's play *How Not to Be a Katsap*, the narrator, recounting her journalistic everyday life in the liberated Kyiv region, notes that she “*came across traces of Russian soldiers everywhere*” and verbally visualises the horrific realities: “Burning tanks, ammunition, hats, boots, telynyashkas⁴⁰, cigarette butts, bottles of alcohol... Bandages, tourniquets, helmets, belts, washing machines, pieces of dead and half-eaten animals... Dugouts, mines, blood on the gates, blood on the stairs, blood on the concrete of the basements... Bodies on the road, bodies in the sand, in a well, in a pit, bodies in bags... In black plastic bags with the inscriptions ‘Lena’, ‘Grandma Masha’, ‘Aunt Valya’...”⁴¹

Where playwrights cannot record the crimes of the Russians in the Kyiv region, they resort to surrealistic writing, opening portals of transmigration of souls, when reality and nothingness become one. One can move freely between these dimensions, and thus, the characters do not die but pass through these portals between worlds as if returning alive (*Mobile Waves of Being* by Volodymyr Rafeenko; *Poker with Fate* by Kateryna Kholod).

Thus, in the playwright's optics, the Kyiv region becomes a living shield, thanks to which Kyiv is not occupied and Ukrainian statehood is not destroyed, but this is possible at the cost of

³⁹ Or Chuzhesranka, which is a wordplay that can roughly be translated as “foreign sh*thead”

⁴⁰ A horizontally striped undershirt worn as a uniform by Russian military personnel.

⁴¹ О. Гриценко, Як не стати кацапом <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/play/yak-ne-staty-katsapom> (access 29.08.2023)

enormous losses and violent deaths of Ukrainian civilians, so in the plays, the playwrights visualise vast rows of fresh graves – “on many graves, flags flutter in the wind”.⁴²

A separate study could be written about other Ukrainian cities, places of strength and resistance, to which many dramatic texts of the war are devoted: Kharkiv (*The Eve* by Dmytro Ternovyi; *The Post-war Scenario* by Kostyantyn Solovyyenko; *Me, War, and Toy Grenade* by Nina Zakhochenko; *What Rudy is Afraid of* by Kira Sytnikova; *Two Sketches About War* by Yulita Ran; *Cosmonauts* by Iryna Beschetnov; *Giraffe Named Mons* by Oleg Mikhailov), Chernihiv (*Turi-Ruri* by Yulia Nechai), Zaporizhzhia (*Vino* by Natalia Ignatieva), Mykolaiv (*The Transporter* by Nina Zakhochenko), Kherson (*Sycamores of Kherson, Those are Dreams During the War, Life is Unstoppable*, and *Our Children* by Natalia Blok; *A Dictionary of Emotions in War Time* and *Diary of the Occupation* by Elena Astasieva; *Decolonize Yourself* and *Memel-Dnipro* by Artur Sumarokov; *Kherson* by Vitaliy Havura; *Stickers* by Ihor Nosovsky; *Molochaynyk* by Oksana Hrytsenko). However, we will focus on the images of a city that was almost destroyed.

MARIUPOL: A PORTAL TO OBLIVION

For the contemporary artistic discourse of the war, Mariupol is becoming a special place of memory. Let's recall that the Russians managed to occupy this city on May 10, 2014, but they stayed there for barely a month, as Ukrainian soldiers of the Azov battalion drove them out on June 13, 2014. Nevertheless, the city remained Russian-speaking and Russian cultural institutions were maintained there at public expense, for example, the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theater, known to the townspeople as Mariupol Drama, and perhaps the most significant number of Ukrainian drama texts created after February 24, 2022, is dedicated to its tragedy.

Many playwrights have recorded and interpreted the crimes committed by Russians against humanity in Mariupol: the targeted destruction of a maternity hospital with women in labour and newborn babies (*Planting an Apple Tree* by Iryna Harets; *Mariupol Drama* by Oleksandr Havrosh; *Closed Sky* by Neda Nezhdana); the dropping of powerful 50-ton bombs on the building of the Mariupol Drama Theater, which became a shelter for two thousand civilians (*Mariupol Drama* by Oleksandr Havrosh; *The Day of the Bombed Theater* by Lyuba and Ihor Lypovskyi; *Fragments and Puzzles* by Olha Matsiupa); the struggle for Azovstal (*The*

⁴² Т. Киценко, Хрест <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/play/khrest> (access 29.08.2023)

Trumpeter by Inna Honcharova); a generalised chronicle of the tragic events of the besieged Mariupol (*Ten Kilometers* by Iryna Feofanova; *The City of Mary: the Siege Diaries* by Andriy Bondarenko; *The Face of the Color of War* by Oleksiy Hnatiuk; *A Marathon of Russian Roulette* by Kateryna Penkova; *Under the Open Sky* by Anastasia Prykhodkina).

There are also texts that, beyond the specifics of the crimes, unfold the topos of a wholly destroyed Ukrainian city, and only the fact that it is near the sea, the slices of its toponymy, and the context of its lightning-like encirclement allow us to say that it is Mariupol (*Recall the Future* by Oleksandr Viter; *The Sea Will Remain* by Oleh Mykhailov): there are few topographically recognisable specifics in such works, and there are more proverbial parabolic elements.

For the small part of the Mariupol theatre troupe that managed to evacuate to Rivne, Oleksandr Havrosh's documentary play *Mariupol Drama* was created based on almost 90 hours of stories and interviews that the playwright recorded with Mariupol residents. To contrast with what the Russians have turned the city into, the playwright uses the memories of the characters to present pictures of a peaceful and prosperous Mariupol, which has transformed from an industrial centre with polluted air and littered territory into a modern, luxurious European city since Ukraine's independence. It is interesting that none of the actors who evacuated to Uzhhorod and now work in the Ukrainian Mariupol Drama Theater are native to this city, so they compare their impressions with the towns they came from and talk about their motivation to live in Ukrainian Mariupol. The play's leitmotif is the constant statement of the city's destruction from different angles, "No one imagined that the city would be turned into a pile of construction waste, that there would be nowhere to return to."⁴³ In other words, throughout the play, the City, which grows, blossoms, lives, and impresses with its harmony, gradually turn into a centre of refuge and unprecedented human solidarity and, closer to the end, becomes a ghost, dust, and a massive cemetery. In addition to individual experiences and tragedies, such testimonies capture unique material that captures the ability of Ukrainians to quickly transform into a community imbued with human empathy, mutual assistance, and the talent for rapid self-organisation in situations of excess.

This must be seen as a distinctive feature of Ukrainians even by those playwrights who, until February 24, 2022, did not pay due attention to the existential nature of Russia's war against Ukraine and tolerated Russian narratives and/or Russian culture: from now on,

⁴³ Т. Киценко, Хрест <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/play/khrest> (access 29.08.2023).

everything has changed for them, and the differences between Ukrainians and Russians are recorded in the texts of plays not only at the level of the author's intention as a whole, but also in hundreds of small details, cues, and reflections. For example, if earlier it was customary for many playwrights of the New Drama Orbit to have a Russian-speaking palette of characters who did not want to speak Ukrainian, now in Tetyana Kytsenko's play *Everything Remained in Mariupol*, Russian-speaking refugees from this city realise their Russian-speaking as a significant identification flaw at the end, "Volodya, you won't understand, but listen. Listen. Let's switch to the language, shall we? I don't want anything to associate me with those... animals".⁴⁴

Ukrainian playwrights writing about Mariupol are actively involved in busting the myths of Russian propaganda, which for many years, since June 2014, have deliberately demonised the Azov battalion and attempted to blame the crimes committed by Russians against the townspeople on the Azovs. For example, Oleksandr Havrosh pays considerable attention to how Azov and local territorial defence fighters helped people in the Mariupol theatre while the Russians were constantly trying to hit crowds of civilians.

In her play, *The Trumpeter*, Inna Honcharova recreates the stay of the members of the Azov battalion, together with civilians from Mariupol, in the basement of Azovstal (TN: *a steel plant in Mariupol*) before the Ukrainian defenders of Mariupol received an order to stop resisting and surrender, with allegedly appropriate guarantees from the Ukrainian authorities about the possibility of extradition. It models a situation where, in a basement among people doomed to die, the only surviving musician of an entire orchestra, who likes to create more than shoot, tries to capture the "symphony of war" in music, distinguishing between the sound of hail, mortars, and airstrikes. In a small pocket notebook, he records what he hears, translating it into the language of notes, which are applied to a hand-drawn music stave. Of course, everyone looks at him as if he were crazy, although he does this with a very pragmatic goal: to understand the war, its origins, causes, and its place, and then to taste victory one day. Although the name Mariupol does not appear directly in this text, we can see contextually that a "*large enterprise*"⁴⁵ is Azovstal. The dating of the events to May 2022 generally establishes a topographical reference (those Ukrainian military and civilians who managed to survive the siege left the city on May 16-22, 2022), timed to coincide with an order from the country's

⁴⁴ Т. Киценко, Все лишилось в Мариуполі <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/sites/default/files/texts/kicenکو-mariupol-2023-07-19.pdf> (access 18.11.2023).

⁴⁵ І. Гончарова, Трубач <http://kurbas.org.ua/news/nenazvana-viuna/5.pdf> (access 10.09.2023).

political leadership to all go outside. While squeezing people out of Azovstal's basements, Russian troops continuously bombarded the territory of the enterprise with bombs, missiles, and shells of various calibres, including those prohibited by multiple conventions, so there are always many seriously wounded people in the play's extras, who are being helped by those who are closer to them, not those who know medicine. The nurse Soloveiko (eng. "nightingale"), who can sing in a pleasant voice and is based on Azovstal's medical officer Ptashka (eng. "birdie") (Kateryna Polishchuk, who was returned from Russian captivity in 2023), does not have time to help everyone, so she is delighted when someone else takes the initiative and helps others survive.

Among the Ukrainian defenders in the play, there are people of different ethnicities, e.g., Crimean Tatars, Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians: some of the indigenous peoples returned to Ukraine after Stalin's deportation, and now these people are felt by Ukrainians as never before. Although the play features many lively conversations between the characters about things, they did not have time to discuss before the attack or during the months in the basement. The protagonist catches himself in an intuitive unreality of the events: it seems that everything is happening in a large theatre and that the actors playing the dead are about to come out from behind the scenes to the audience's applause. At the end of the play, the Azov soldiers come to the surface, and the playwright emphasises that they are following orders and deserve to be treated fairly by the Ukrainian authorities. The fate of the Azovs in the Russian colony of Olenivka is also painfully recalled in Tetyana Kytsenko's play *Everything Remained in Mariupol*. This plot will now be accompanied by mythologised stories about the heroism of the Azov battalion fighters, terrible torture in Russian captivity, the extradition of Azov commanders to Turkey, and the appalling crime against Azovs committed in colony No. 120 in the Russian city of Olenivka. As we can see, in the strategy of memorialisation, drama texts will not be perceived in isolation as self-sufficient works of art. Still, they will constantly live in the most comprehensive contexts, becoming their integral part and complementing the whole picture of the relevant "places of memory" that endow the memorial object with the following features: avoidance of oblivion, the ability to evoke emotions and recreate the era.

Contemporary playwrights must document the extreme individual human experiences of those Mariupol residents who managed to survive and move to Ukrainian cities and villages, beginning to work with their traumas: for example, Neda Nezhdana records the stories of Mariupol residents in Chernivtsi while creating the play *Closed Sky*; Andriy Bondarenko is

building the play *The City of Mary: the Siege Diaries* based on interviews with two sisters who managed to evacuate to Lviv region; Kateryna Penkova, who takes care of Ukrainian refugees in Warsaw, records a long monologue of a woman who managed to escape from Mariupol and save her daughters, one of whom was seriously injured, and based on these recordings of testimonies, creates the piece *A Marathon of Russian Roulette*. Conversations with displaced Mariupol residents form the basis of Tetiana Kytsenko's play *Everything Remained in Mariupol*.

Some of the works are intentionally written and realised on the theater stage as collective art therapy (*Closed Sky* by Neda Nezhdana, *Mariupol #hope_for_dawn* by Maryna Pinchuk, *The Face of the Color of War* by Oleksiy Hnatiuk).

The plays of the Mariupol discourse work through long-standing generational traumas that are now being experienced anew not only by adults but also by the youngest Ukrainians, such as the stigma of hunger (*Mariupol Drama* by Oleksandr Havrosh; *Ten Kilometers* by Iryna Feofanova). For example, in Oleksandr Havrosh's work, the stigmas of the Holodomor are imprinted in many scenes and lines when people share a small amount of food, cut a small candy for eight with a knife, rejoice at a tiny, half-finger-sized piece of Dutch cheese, forget what bread looks like, collect snow in barrels to melt it into water for drinking... It is also striking how succinctly the playwright manages to “stretch” and “redistribute” the post-trauma of the famine among the younger generations of Ukrainians. When his characters testify about young mothers with babies transferred to the theatre from a destroyed maternity hospital, they record how “many mothers lost their breast milk from the horror they experienced” and how the military “brought baby formula, the daily ration of which poor mothers stretched for their children for three days”.⁴⁶

The playwrights also comprehend Mariupol as a visual measure of the scale of the Apocalypse through different starting coordinates: Kyiv and Bucha (*Those are Dreams During the War* by Natalia Blok), three other Ukrainian cities from which abused women have to flee (*Green Corridors* by Natalka Vorozhbyt), a cascade of bombed Ukrainian settlements (*Parts of Our Body* by Alex Wood), Kharkiv and Popasna under constant Russian bombardment (*Onkorashka* by Iryna Harets), Kyiv under rocket attacks and Kherson under occupation (*A Dictionary of Emotions in War Time* by Elena Astasieva), shot residential buildings in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Bucha (*Will Ukrainians Be Able to Talk to Russians* by Olga Knyazeva), Okhtyrka

⁴⁶ О. Гаврош, Мариупольська драма. Рукопис автора.

and Kharkiv where people live only underground (*Planting an Apple Tree* by Iryna Harets), occupied Berdiansk and various Ukrainian cities under Russian missiles (*How Are You* by Vitaliy Karaban); in terms of the brutal statistics of civilian deaths (Andriy Bondarenko measures the distance between Lviv and Mariupol not in 1250 kilometers, but in “1250 corpses of civilians, and this is only according to the official statistics for today, which always downplays everything in order not to tease the Apocalypse, not to look it in the eye”;⁴⁷ *Survivor’s Syndrome*; Elena Astasieva compares the number of civilians killed in Mariupol – 22 thousand according to official statistics alone – to the population of the Irish city of Wexford, where she is hiding from the war, because that's how many people live there; *A Dictionary of Emotions in War Time*); as one of the “points of no return” – that is, something that Russians will never be forgiven for, “Points of No Return are transformed into cages with an infinite number of false bottoms that collapse and destroy living worlds an infinite number of times. Rockets flying at Kyiv; people tortured in Bucha; Mariupol, wiped off the face of the Earth; the dried-up corpse of a cat on a child's bed in an abandoned apartment [...]”⁴⁸ (*Hocus-Pocus* by Liudmyla Tymoshenko), as a city of death and mass graves, a Dead City.

“I want to walk around the city right now – I would walk, cry, touch the ruins to realise that the houses are gone. I would go to my grandmother's apartment to realise that these deaths are real, that all this is gone. To me, Mariupol still exists. Although I know that it doesn't,”⁴⁹ says one of the sisters at the end of Andriy Bondarenko's documentary play *The City of Mary: The Siege Diaries* by Andriy Bondarenko.

In Oleh Mykhailov's drama *The Sea Will Remain*, created for the puppet theatre, many dead birds are always near the sea after shelling. The city is burning from constant rocket attacks; its sunsets are very spectacular and eerie at the same time. The play contains a terrifying story told through a sign language interpreter by a mute fifteen-year-old girl about how the occupiers shot cars with people trying to evacuate the city, how they mined all the exits from the city so that people would blow themselves up on mines, how the severely wounded died before everyone's eyes, how strangers buried corpses and put car license plates on top of the graves so that the graves could be found and recognised someday. Eventually,

⁴⁷ А. Бондаренко, Синдром вцілілого https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/sites/default/files/texts/sindrom-vcililogo_andriy-bondarenko.pdf (access 30.05.2023).

⁴⁸ Л. Тимошенко, Фокус-покус <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/play/fokus-pokus> (access 29.08.2023).

⁴⁹ А. Бондаренко, Місто Марії: Щоденники облоги <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/sites/default/files/texts/kicenko-mariupol-2023-07-19.pdf> (access 11.11.2023).

our characters also die in the occupation, as we learn in their otherworldly dialogue, in which even dead people are still afraid of aeroplanes and react to loud noises.

In the play *Recall the Future*, Oleksandr Viter, through the character Urba (the Dead City), engages in an imaginary dialogue with Charon. For Urba, as a destroyed Ukrainian city, it is crucial to understand the origins and reasons for his reckless naïvety for a long time because now he realises that Charon has already had to carry more than one dead city in his boat. In a monologue of insight, the dead town, destroyed during the war, recalls its colonial history, in which the colonisers hated it because it was older than them and had reached development without them, for its inner freedom and proud name, invented long before them. Just as the victims of crimes testify about them, the destroyed city begins to remember how it was killed, not only by destroying streets or breaking glass windows but by deliberately destroying millions of human lives, which are much more fragile than stone.

In their elaboration of the discourse of Mariupol, as well as the discourse of the new phase of the war in general, playwrights resort to shifting narrative modes, giving the floor to the most vulnerable narrators – children (*Ten Kilometers* by Iryna Feofanova) and animals – either those who were abandoned by their people or those who are experiencing the tragedy of the city together with their people (*We Were (Not) Abandoned* by Kristina Bagaeva). For example, Oleksandr Havrosh creates a panorama of a “sea” of different animals inside the Mariupol Theater building, which people took to save their lives.

The tragedy of Mariupol through the eyes of a Ukrainian refugee living with her children in a moderate European city does not allow the protagonist of Anna Halas's play *The Chronicles of the Lost Soul* to breathe calmly. She begins to see the peaceful, sunny spring and carefree citizens through a distorted glass, “I caught myself thinking that I was annoyed by the color white. How can you wear white now? The world should be in mourning every day, not pulling on white coats or walking white boots on snow-covered roads when there is no living place left in Mariupol on the torn body of the city. The trees are also beginning to bloom; for some reason, they are white. They should be covered with red wilted flowers, and their trunks should be covered with crimson resin. But no! White coats! White flowers!”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ А. Галас, Хроніки евакуйованого тіла і загубленої душі Галас Анна. Хроніки евакуйованого тіла і загубленої душі <https://ukrdramahub.org.ua/sites/default/files/texts/khroniki-zagublenoi-dushi.pdf> (access 16.05.2023).

Indeed, there are a lot of deaths in the plays about Mariupol in 2022. If we consider the war as an attack of the Thanatos civilisation on the Eros civilisation, it may sometimes seem that the death-worshippers are winning in this battle.

Therefore, it is crucial that we also record numerous signs of the victory of life over death in the drama of the Mariupol discourse: the blooming of trees in an almost dead city (*Flowering* by Olha Matsyupa), the puppy that a boy finds after losing his parents and burying his shepherd dog Ayda (*Ten Kilometers* by Iryna Feofanova). These birds build nests under shelling and sing the song of the newborn city (*Recall the Future* by Oleksandr Viter).

And, since we are talking about drama, the tragedy of Mariupol is often comprehended through the mediation of the theatre code and in its semiotic categories (*Mariupol Drama* by Oleksandr Havrosh; *The Day of the Bombed Theater* by Lyuba and Ihor Lypovskyi; *The Trumpeter* by Inna Honcharova). In *Mariupol Drama* by Oleksandr Havrosh, a small magnet with a picture of the theatre brought by the actors to Ukrainian land appears as a place of memory and a sign of local commemoration, as a restored connection between the theatre's past life and its long but necessary revival, in which the theatre is not only and not so much its building, "The Mariupol Theater is destroyed, but it is not dead. It lives on. We, those who survived and survived, are telling you this. We helped each other, believed in Ukraine, and did not betray it. We are Mariupol...".⁵¹

Mariupol's discourse is becoming a visualisation of considerations identical to Ron Capps's book *Writing War*: "Some of us write because we need to understand certain things, and writing is the only way to do that. Putting words on paper helps us think about an event or story and understand it better. Sometimes, we do it just because we need to get the story out of our heads, tell it, and be done with it. Writing turns ideas into something concrete, tangible, something we can finally push away from us. It can give us distance".⁵²

While Mariupol is not the only Ukrainian city almost destroyed by the Russians (Bakhmut, Popasna, Avdiivka, Maryinka, Dvorichna, Izium, Stanytsia Luhanska, and many more cities and towns can continue this list), it is the city that has become a symbol of the anti-human nature of Russian aggression and the city that already has the most memorialisation practices not only in Ukrainian drama, but also in documentary, film, and visual technologies. There was no such resistance belt around Mariupol as there was around Kyiv, and we do not know the actual

⁵¹ О. Гаврош, Маріупольська драма. Рукопис автора.

⁵² Р. Кеппс, Як писати про війну. Київ: Смолоскип, 2021, с.12

number of dead Mariupol residents; it is problematic whether we will be able to tell for sure because Russian criminals have been diligently destroying traces of their crimes in this city for a long time. However, the drama texts mentioned here are only the first stage of artistic reflections on Mariupol, which was more likely to record and less likely to symbolise human and collective histories.

CONCLUSION

The “living stories” created by Ukrainian playwrights against the backdrop of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine are credible in terms of the accuracy of the facts, the recreated models of individual and collective human behaviour, anthropological details, and the accelerated identification transformations that occur with Ukrainian civilians amid the war, when the entire territory of the country begins to be perceived as “their” space, as intimate as possible emotionally. The drama texts record the transgressions of time and space in different Ukrainian cities during the war: time transforms into infinity on February 24, 2022, and the vertical coordinates seem to be inverted because the sky is not a blessing but a constant threat, so relative security is ensured by the development, appropriation, and cultivation of underground space rather than the above-ground. This forced “descent into the depths” is fueled by appeals to the transgenerational memory of one's own family and the search for support in the strength of one's own family. On the one hand, war in cities is becoming commonplace. On the other hand, the range of forms of resistance that Ukrainian civilians offer to the aggressor is significantly expanding. The plays about Kyiv and Mariupol show us two established opposing models of a Ukrainian city in war: the Siege Fortress and the Dead City.

As we can see, Ukrainian drama created after February 24, 2022, is invaluable material for anthropological studies on the city in the war of the twenty-first century, which is waged in violation of all the conventions of war, aimed at cruelty to civilians and at their maximum suffering and mass destruction to make free people renounce their own civic identity and agree to submit to a dying empire.

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Meet the vertep, a baroque Ukrainian Christmas tradition revived amid Russia's war