

The Man Who Does Not Remember Yesterday
by Oleksandr Lakhtiuk

"From now on, the Ukrainian People's Republic will be an independent, free, sovereign state of the Ukrainian people. We want to cooperate with all neighbouring states, such as Russia, Poland, Austria, Romania, Turkey and others, we want to live in harmony and friendship, but none of them can interfere in the life of the Independent Ukrainian Republic".

*From the "Fourth Universal"
From the Ukrainian Central Council
Of the 22 of January, 1918, Kyiv.*

It was the end of the second millennium. In the autumn of 1919, after a year and a half of self-proclaimed independence, the Ukrainian People's Republic found itself surrounded by Bolsheviks, White Guards and Polish troops ready to challenge the Ukrainian people's right to independence in what historians would later call the Triangle of Death. The only hope for the Ukrainian chief otaman, Symon Petliura, was the help of the Entente. The English journalist G. Arlsberg soon wrote:

"Petliura appealed in vain to the International Red Cross to save young Ukrainians in the name of humanity."

Therefore, in early 1919, Simon Petliura dispatched an official diplomatic delegation to Paris, where the peace conference was commencing to determine the fate of postwar Europe, in order to secure official international recognition of the UPR. Alongside it, he sent a second, unofficial but, as it turned out, much more successful, musical choir led by conductor Oleksandr Koshyts. The Geneva-based La Patrie Suisse was astonished:

"The Ukrainian choir embarked on a truly triumphant tour. The Ukrainian Republic aims to restore its independence, and thus, it decided to vividly showcase its existence. 'I sing, therefore I exist,' it affirms, and its singing is truly remarkable.»

It is interesting to note that just a year earlier, in November 1918, during the negotiations in Yassy, the French consul Emile Hennot unequivocally declared:

"Ukraine, or, more correctly, Southern Russia, has never had a history of its own, nor a national or ethnographic identity."

Nevertheless, from May to October 1919, Koshyts' choir delivered almost forty triumphant concerts: Prague, Brno, Baden, Geneva, Bern, Lausanne, Zurich, and Basel. Ultimately, Vienna concluded:

"Ukraine's cultural maturity should serve as legitimization of its political independence for the world."

However, setting aside the accustomed pride in the success of the Ukrainian choir, we must express gratitude for the attention to the audience itself. There he is, on the balcony! A sleek Parisian gentleman is looking through his binoculars directly at the eyes of chorister Sofia Kolodievna, who couldn't hold back tears while singing the anthem. "What profound pain, how pure it makes her singing," the gentleman's heart throbs. "How would you describe what she is doing?" the gentleman wonders aloud. "Truly exotic," the gentleman's eyebrows rise. Well, gentlemen, well, whether out of admiration for the refreshing breeze from the East or because the audience finds the seat most comfortable when artists present a culture that is about to be destroyed by an ever-bloodthirsty Russia, but while the Ukrainian people was on the verge of losing any right to identity and free existence, the European audience demanded an encore from the Republican Chapel choristers with Mykola Leontovych's now globally recognized "Shchedryk" dozens of times.

Soon, two years later, in the village of Markivka, Mykola will accommodate two Chekists overnight: Afanasii Hryshchenko and Fedir Hrabchak, and at seven-thirty in the morning, a shot will be fired from the room of the forty-three-year-old composer. A year later, on October 5, 1922, the Ukrainian National Choir will perform with great success at Carnegie Hall in New York. It was then that the American public would hear "Shchedryk" for the first time. In another hundred years, the U.S. Air Force "Singing Sergeants", supporting Ukraine's efforts to defend its right to independence in the war with Russia, will perform the best of all the "Singing Sergeants" could do, "Carol of the Bells" ("Shchedryk" translated into English). Really?

Well, a hundred years ago, art, appealing to humanity, did not build such a communication that would call the viewer to practical action. Do we have the right to deprive an audience of the privilege of contemplation? Certainly not. But doesn't true humanity require participation? So what exactly is today's call by Ukrainian artists to participate in the confrontation with Russian colonialism?

In 2022, with the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops, the question of dialogue between the Ukrainian artistic community and the world became extremely acute. Thanks to support programs, artistic residencies, grant competitions, and individuals who have expressed interest in active cooperation with Ukrainians, there is, for the first time in years of isolation, a real opportunity for our country to make itself known in the international media space. In 2024, Mstyslav Chernov's "20 Days in Mariupol" is nominated for an Oscar in the Best Feature Documentary category. Volodymyr (the police officer who evacuated Mstyslav from the occupied city after filming) kept saying, "The images from the

destroyed maternity hospital would change the course of the war." If earlier these shots were a cry of despair, now the Oscar nomination legitimizes the experience of Mariupol, giving it a voice before a broader audience. And this year, at least one Ukrainian voice gets the opportunity to speak quietly and still be heard.

"I wish there was something happening every day: an exhibition, a gig, a play, a film festival. Because every empty space in the posters that is not used by us is taken by Russians or Belarusians, who at first coexisted perfectly with Putin's regime, and now continue to drag their "great" culture to the West in their suitcases."

These words belong to Stas Zhyrkov, the former artistic director of the Kyiv Academic Theatre Zoloti Vorota (2014-2019) and the Kyiv Academic Theatre of Drama and Comedy on the Left Bank of the Dnipro River (2019-2022). Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Stas Zhyrkov has organised the theatre's tour of Europe with the play "Bad Roads" directed by Tamara Trunova and written by Natalka Vorozhbyt. As of the beginning of 2024, he has staged more than ten performances in Europe: Schaubühne Berlin, Zurich, Alytus, Vilnius, Düsseldorf, Munich, etc... He benefited from his connections with the European art community, which he had developed in previous years, and Stas is not the only example, but what can we say about young independent artists who were forced to leave the country into absolute obscurity?

On the flip side is our experience, so let's delve into it and the noteworthy initiative led by Italian director Matteo Spiazzi – "Stage4Ukraine." Spiazzi expressed keen interest in supporting young Ukrainian artists, creating a platform for the exchange of experiences in addressing trauma through stage performances. The inaugural production, "Trojans," reinterpreted the ancient Greek tragedy, drawing parallels between the ruins of Troy and contemporary Donetsk. The cast comprised 35 Ukrainian student actors who, despite leaving the country, opted to return. When questioned about their decision to come back amid ongoing conflict, their responses reflected three reasons:

1. «Probably, Ukraine stands as the only space enabling constructive dialogue with the audience, marked by a high level of mutual interest. This stands in stark contrast to often unproductive interactions with Europeans, who, unfortunately, display a one-sided interest in solving the problem."
2. "Ukrainian art embodies a revolutionary spirit, both socio-culturally and existentially. While Europe's overly comfortable conditions tend to foster complacency and (just for example) Russia's harsh environment stifles creativity, making it degenerative or impossible, in Ukraine, art is a privilege that

demands the courage to take risks and assume responsibility. It necessitates profound reflection when navigating a society scarred by trauma. "(However, this ideal was destined to be shattered: students quickly realized that their return to «pre-war» Ukraine led them into an unstable and perilous current state of affairs. Creativity, a process demanding energy, acute attention, and both physical and psychological health, is continually compromised by an excess of stress factors.)

3. "The evident lack of concrete state strategies and mechanisms for integrating Ukrainian artists into the European community is concerning. The typical proposition for the average Ukrainian, regardless of their field, competence, or profession, is limited to acquiring basic language skills and entering factory production or the service sector. "

Despite the global spotlight on Ukraine's war, its tragedy feels as remote for Europe as the ancient fall of Troy. The contrast between being a creative guest and engaging in equal cooperation, influencing the host country's public opinion, is glaring. Some Ukrainian artists maintain a brutal strategy for war awareness, yet current circumstances demand a clear and compelling argument. The radical approach worked in pre-war Ukraine, revolutionizing the consciousness of passive citizens who lacked an alternative experience of interacting with their own state, and ultimately, the experience of living in a free democratic country (before 1991).

"In the same way, a whole system of artists was brought up in culture, who were told: 'Well, you do art. Your task is to sow the eternal and the sublime, but not to meddle where it is not needed, etc.' But the artist wants to meddle where it is not needed and where it is not allowed. Now I can address young artists. YOU HAVE TO BE CULTURAL TERRORISTS! Ukraine lacks cultural terrorists. WE NEED OUR OWN AL-QAEDA IN CULTURE. If in every city - Lviv, Donetsk, Kharkiv, Kyiv - we will have projects like cultural explosions, it will affect the so-called political beau monde; they will not be able to ignore it." Andrii Zholdak, 2010.

However, in the present war context, this idea of a theatrical Al-Qaeda becomes absurd. Picture this: December 2023, Kharkiv's bureaucrats furrow their brows over next year's budget. They ponder: Is splurging on theater worth it for the imminent metamodern age? With pandemic restrictions, just fifty seats are allowed. Solution? Theaters go DIY, saving cash for urgent stuff: paving stones, flower beds... more paving stones.

- «Wait," exclaimed the pince-nez-wearing theatre aficionado, "Can we really just abandon them in these trying times?»

- «Keep calm," interjected another pince-nez-clad gentleman (apparently, the dress code of the day). "Let's not stray into discussing what's timely and what's not..." he trailed off with a resigned sigh.

In the end, it was decided to award two grants: one as seed money for the winning theatre to transition to independence from state funding, and the other for the same theatre to produce a play that would become a new sensation, drawing the audience's attention and ensuring packed houses for seasons to come. This would spark genuine competition, known to be the best catalyst for development.

However, the plans fell apart. The disgraceful treatment of the temple of Melpomene sparked massive protests, with bans no longer deterring true theater enthusiasts. Performances by suicide actors in regional centers ended in terrorist acts, claiming numerous police victims. Or rather, self-sacrifices. Resourceful legal maneuvers temporarily halted such sacrificial acts by artists after the total theater ban in the country. Henceforth, those eager to continue their artistic pursuits had to consciously tread beyond the law. True followers of Christ's teachings shouted, drowning out church bells: "Repent and erase the memory of the art temple! There's only one temple - God's, and that's final!!!" Even volunteers and activists, initially rallying near the Dovzhenko Center, backed them, aligning their principles with those on the "economic front": "Indeed, there's but one front to repent on!"

The propaganda was working its magic, and, embarrassingly enough, even fundraisers for ammunition for actors serving in the Armed Forces dragged on like never before. No one dared to criticize them, but the changing national consciousness was evident. Consequently, the merchandise depicting classical characters of ukrainian drama in a vulgar manner, along with songs from rapper Kalush, who opportunistically sang: "...*Маклена Граса, ніздуї на трасу*" (ukr. "*Maklena Grasa, well, go to hell!*") drove the remaining theater figures deep underground.

Meanwhile, legal scholars noted that esteemed artists, the old guard, quickly found more appealing pursuits after the new law was enacted. Ostap Stupka championed lawfulness the loudest, albeit only according to his lawyers, as the actor himself was serving time for drunk driving. Others ventured into business. Curiously, the former Podil Theatre, now a sweetshop, became a prime spot for selling Roshen products.

However, by the end of that fateful year, the crackdowns and bans, demanding remarkable bravery from underground artists, began to yield results. In a time when theatre was being likened to Al-Qaeda, artists became resistance members, willing to pay any price for their now sacred mission. The buzz around these new "energies" couldn't stay hidden for long and exploded into the limelight. Anonymous broadcasts of underground performances somehow caught the attention of Europe's cultural elite, spreading like wildfire and dominating global discourse. Suddenly, the provision of arms to Ukraine hinged on the fate of its theatre. It was a triumph for pure, unadulterated art, a victory celebrated by a presidential decree that legalised the theatre in country. The president even had to publicly condemn Kalush for the first time.

When these heroes emerged from the shadows into the sunlight, they were blinded by the brilliance of a sun of a new era. It was they who had gifted Ukraine unparalleled aviation, a fleet of drones all

donated by astonished Europeans. What impact their performances would have had on the average Ukrainian's worldview was left to speculation. But one young director, taking a drag from a cigarette proffered by the Minister of Culture himself, simply said, "You know... I'm done." He walked away and got drunk, and they all followed suit, never to return to the theatre again.

If only it were not a fiction! Ukraine must stop seeing Europeans merely as spectators. Real strategies for mutual cooperation are the only productive form of assistance. Ukrainian artists should swiftly transition from expecting charity to fostering empathy and launching competitive international projects. Ultimately, a country's theatre policy in conflict faces deeper challenges than mere funding gaps. In my view, three key aspects will shape the future of Ukrainian theatre:

1. The theater of the witness which serves as a tribunal for collective memory, aiming to determine the fairness and truthfulness of judgments while debunking propaganda narratives. It challenges dominant narratives in public interpretation, particularly of historical events, including the present. Beyond serving as a court, it's a public institution for civic education, offering practical methods for democratic engagement and conflict resolution. Additionally, it prevents the preservation and amplification of marginalized societal elements, promoting active integration of all that is alienated, ignored, and forgotten.
2. Contemporary Ukrainian theater cannot avoid engaging with a traumatized society. Without professional methods of psychological communication between witnesses, participants, and the audience, it will be ineffective and unable to positively impact people's lives. The focus should be on the ethics and comfort of witness participation, ensuring their safety and fostering a sense of belonging among those who share similar experiences. Theater workshops that concentrate on attention, trust, collective rhythms, voice, breathing, emotional recognition and control, interaction on stage, and the development of memory, imagination, and speech offer valuable avenues for the psychological healing and restoration of confidence among traumatized individuals. Theater can serve as a refuge where everyone has the chance to listen and be heard.
3. Theatre needs to achieve independence. Just as Ukraine is striving for its own autonomy, Ukrainian theatre must mature and become a competitive player in the contemporary art market. By rethinking its communication strategies with the needs of the modern audience, theatre must step out of its comfort zone: embracing digitalization, expanding its functionalities, implementing long-term business strategies, and enhancing its marketing efforts. Contemporary theatre must unlock the potential of its capabilities, as it encompasses various forms of creativity, making its potential essentially boundless..

While theater grapples with adapting to the new reality, many artists continue their craft on the frontlines, now serving as soldiers, reflecting on the changes that have affected them deeply. Artur Dron, a Ukrainian

writer serving in the Armed Forces, spends his breaks during the rotation giving interviews about his book "We Were Here," largely written in trenches and dugouts. Alongside him, writers like Serhiy Hnezdilov, Oleksandr Zhukhan, Oleksa Kravchuk, Maksym Kryvtsov (who was killed on January 7, 2024), and many others represent Ukrainian frontline art, gaining autonomy as a distinct artistic tradition. Their work embodies themes of fighting for life in a free country, with aesthetics of brotherhood, revenge, sacred purpose, the rugged Donbas steppe, the scent of mice in dugouts, and bloodied hands. A poignant motif is the emotional and spiritual connection, often tied to family, friends, and loved ones back home but while defending the essence of human existence, the warrior himself risks losing it.

Nevertheless, we have the power to create environments where, at the very least, their art will not exist in isolation from our collective experience. Regrettably, while art embodies our ideas, it fails to shield both creator and audience from the perilous interpretations that may follow. When one becomes engrossed in a single interpretation, they risk losing sight of reality. Much like a dream, the detached world of beliefs and perspectives, divorced from societal context, is riddled with absurdities and contradictions. Eventually, in this chaotic world of relativity, any notion can masquerade as truth. Yet, within this tumult, art, as a beacon of discovery and knowledge, could assume an even greater significance — akin to that of our parents, who bequeath to us the collective memory of humanity.

While the previous generation of artists who were repressed by Russian politics for their activities may be considered as our parents, we, the contemporary Ukrainian cultural figures, appear to be orphans. Sometimes I ask myself: why are there so few Ukrainians known around the world? And I find the answer: while the hypothetical John writes his thesis or plays professional football, the hypothetical Stepan is dying in the war for the lives of his loved ones, his parents are being repressed for writing in their mother tongue, his children are dying of Russian-made famine. We are responsible for ensuring that future generations do not feel like orphans in the context of history and culture. Because what started yesterday will continue today.

I am the artist and I am standing in the river of time up to my chest and see in the reflection of the waves a man who does not remember what happened yesterday. So I know how the river resembles a war. It doesn't allow you to look back. With our ribs broken from the heartbeat, we watch the waves burning, the current carrying the bodies of our friends and enemies. We walk heavily, close our eyes and kiss the water, burning our lips, charring our skin, looking like a nightmare. And with that kiss, everything behind us disappears.

One day, we will be able to spend all the money in the world that goes to wars on medicine, culture and many different schools for our children. And perhaps they will teach us something important. Then, when there is no one left to remember this day, perhaps human freedom will no longer end where the freedom of another begins, what if it goes on?

