

Sofia Rosa-Lavrentii

The current research focuses on the methods and adaptations that the Ukrainian puppet theatre has explored in order to build communication with younger viewers in times of war. In the article, we explore how the modern puppet theatre presents such difficult topics as war and trauma and also how it specifically communicates with its youngest audiences. We explore the question: “What is the role of theatre in speaking and creating narratives on topics provoked by the war?” In discussing the creativity of Ukrainian puppet theatres from this perspective, we single out several distinct themes, each of which is illustrated with examples.

Dr. Sofia Rosa-Lavrentii is Associate Professor of Ivan Franko National University of Lviv. She has 15 years of experience in the field of education through mentoring, research, and editorial work. She has published on the subjects of theatre history, audiences, and women’s experiences in theatre. She is a board member of UNIMA Ukraine.

Introduction

This article will discuss the methods and adaptations that the Ukrainian puppet theatre has implemented since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, how it has created a means to communicate and discuss the war and its consequences with younger audiences and participants, and how this theatre continues to react to ongoing war and its threats. In the article, I discuss how the modern puppet theatre in Ukraine explores relevant but painful topics with children and adolescents. A question considered in this article is, “What is the role of the puppet theatre in speaking and creating narratives on topics provoked by the war in relation to youth?” By exploring the creativity of Ukrainian puppet theatres from the perspective of youth, it reveals four distinct themes: personal narratives, seeking protection, voicing concerns, and healing from trauma. I illustrate

each of these themes with examples from a variety of puppet shows.

Theatre that Creates Narratives Provoked by War: *Noah's Children*

The first theme of personal narratives relates to how Ukrainian puppet theatre builds communication and offers an opportunity for discourse with teenage audiences on topics provoked by war. These include a revived confrontation with the Holocaust, the violence inherent in conflicts, and acts of human dignity in relation to war. Such topics have appeared in Ukrainian puppet theatres since the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian war in 2014. We found that puppetry allows artists and young people to communicate through transformations and relevant symbols. Theatre can thereby avoid additional traumatization of the audience and, instead, it can focus on the expression of human values through puppetry. We found this potential in the example of the Lviv Theatre People and Puppets' production of *Noah's Children* by E. Schmidt, directed by Mykhailo Urytskyi.

Thanks to expressive visual images, the creators were able to poetically distance their audiences from the subject of war trauma. The show's narrative explored how historical figures rose above the tragedies of the Second World War. This story brought the audience towards an awareness of the value of each character and to an understanding of the responsibility each of us has for what we leave behind in this world. The performance was first created in 2020, before the outbreak of the full-scale war, but it nonetheless is relevant to the experience of the current Ukrainian-Russian war. The puppets, created by Ulyana Kulchytska, are elongated shadows, without bright colors or expressive faces, appearing like souls from the past. Young viewers follow the complex story of the characters, including that of two teenagers: Joseph (played by Nadia Krat) and Rudy (played by Volodymyr Melnikov). Their journey takes them through a war that brings separation, fear, and the pain of loss. But the show also explores positive experiences: hope, trust, loyalty and friendship, unexpected joy, and love conquering all. These are presented as values that stay with a person forever, that can be passed

on as a treasure and sown into the human soul like parts of a garden. These values are presented by animating garden-souls, plastically molded by actors, that seem to sprout, becoming in this production an expressive image of the potential for human life that grows, like yearning for love. Through the storytelling of these teenage children during their own war experiences, this production portrays humanistic values that we instill in ourselves as lifeforms and that we then pass on to others.

Theatre that Protects: Kharkiv Academic Puppet Theatre

The second theme is protection. During the war, theatres have become actual places providing protection and succor. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, Ukrainian theatres stopped working as theatres and, instead, turned into shelters, volunteer centers, and spaces for museums, libraries, and conservatories. Almost every Ukrainian theatre has gone through this stage of performing the function of a place of shelter. Ukrainian theatres have literally become places of refuge, places where people can find protection. Since 2022, actors, directors, stage designers can be designated by a single word: “volunteer.” Since the first wave of refugees, victims of Russian attacks, theatre people have provided physical comfort, such as food and accommodation, and psychological comfort, by listening to the traumatized, empathizing with their pain, fear, and worries. Many theatre artists described their experiences during the first months of the war as one of creative and psychological “numbness.” They themselves felt that they could no longer do theatre as they had once known it, that they feared they would probably never be able to do theatre again. These were the first stages of self-awareness of being an artist under the extreme circumstances of war. They felt a sense of disillusionment with art, because it failed to cope with the global challenge. Art did not stop cruelty and hatred. Thus, a certain apathy towards art, which appeared irrelevant under this harsh new reality, emerged. Eventually, their faith in art resurfaced, and they began, once again, to reach out to their audiences.

In frontline cities, which suffered (and continues to do so) from frequent heavy shelling, the path of theatres has been, overall, similar, and yet with each city having its own

distinctive qualities. For example, Kharkiv is a city of many thousands of citizens, who often hide in the subway tunnels to shelter from the war. In the first months of the military invasion, many people, including children, literally lived in these underground spaces. At some point, several actors thought to bring some form of theatre to these cold underground spaces, infected with the population's fears and grief. The theatre provided a creative shift from the otherwise unbearable reality, as a means of escapist salvation for both performers and audiences.

In this context, the story of the puppetry students of the I. Kotliarevsky Kharkiv National University of Arts and the actors of the V. Afanasiev Kharkiv Academic Puppet Theatre is truly heartwarming. One day, they decided to move one of their performances for children to the subway space. The show was a fairy tale by Anna Schmidt, directed by Oksana Dmitrieva, with puppet design by Natalia Denysova. The actors recall the subway performance as somewhat "surreal." They entered the subway in their theatre costumes and announced to the dazed inhabitants that they would be performing a play for children. The audience, however, included everyone: children, teenagers, and adults. Oksana Dmitrieva admits that it was their most unusual tour, a tour of the Kharkiv metro station, crowded with people. Dmitrieva recalls that the performances in the subway became such "a special meeting with the audience for me, when we ran towards each other. The viewer to the actor, the actor to the viewer. And it was a mutual salvation. We ended each performance with a hug to satisfy the tactile hunger that was extremely strong at the time. There were a lot of hugs, if people allowed it, they needed it ...The theatre now has a new function—it begins to heal."^[1]

Many Kharkiv residents at the time admitted that performances in the subway, for some brief moments, brought them back to their recent, "normal" lives, which still seemed like a great luxury at the time. Such performances reminded the viewers of the life they wanted to return to and needed to fight for. It was definitely easier to weave performances for children into the underworld of the subway than performances for adult audiences because, the theatre artists believed, adults would not be able to afford the luxury of "entertainment" for any length of time. Also, in this example of a children's

story, it was specifically the puppet theatre that could make the transition, thanks to its flexible form, the mobility of bringing small puppet figures into temporary spaces, such as metros and bomb shelters. The specificity of images produced in this visual theatre form, with its focus on the stories of human subjects caught within conflicts, managed to create an atmosphere of trust and provided a means of sincere conversation with its audience.

Similar to the above-mentioned experience of a puppet show that offered mental comfort is the performance of the fairy-tale *Ivasyk Telesyk*. It was created by a family of artists, Daria Kushnirenko and Pavel Saveliev, now local celebrities, as a personal initiative. In this show, the artists speak to the youngest viewers about the values of love, dignity, and freedom through the image of a bad character, the Witch-War Puppet, and through its opposite, love songs. This is a folk tale about danger, rescue, love, and tenderness—universal and enduring themes. The artists who created the show, with their sons, still live in Kharkiv. They volunteer tirelessly, and often deliver humanitarian aid to frontline villages. Daria Kushnirenko initiated the creation of the puppet characters for her imaginary fairy tale. Kushnirenko recalls seeing so many children during the gray, difficult war days, who appeared like mice quietly peering out of the windows of their homes. She felt the need to talk to them through theatre, drawing on her own inner strength. At night, even during air alarms, she would sew puppets as a distraction, almost as if in a dream. Together with her husband, she created the performance from scraps and found materials. It was the most mobile and flexible performance they have made.

Ivasyk-Telesyk contained both humor, such as in the scenes of the fighting geese who have to guard the airspace over Ukraine, and tenderness, embodied in the flute melody of a mother's lullaby. The war materialized in the artist's hands in the form of the Puppet-Witch, which, according to the original plot of a Ukrainian folk tale, chased the main character, a boy named Ivasyk, to kill and eat him. The Witch took on a militarized appearance in the puppet show: it resembled a steel tank with a huge mouth full of sharp fangs—a scary, creepy, and threatening character and stage symbol, but it also

expressed a clumsy and inhibited way of operating. In the narrative, the little boy did not defeat the military witch. Instead, he makes every effort to escape from her and manages to run away. The key message of the performance is the need to understand what helps a person remain human, despite fear in the cruelest circumstances. The mother's lullaby, a flute melody, is a simple thing that can yet sow seeds of love that grows; it gives strength, and asserts the mother's inner freedom, promising the hope that people can remain themselves and not let the chaos and cruelty of the world into their hearts. There is a distinct, even visual difference between the two main puppet characters: Ivasyk is made from a wooden block, a natural and seemingly warm material, while the Witch is made of steel, denoting her sharpness, hostility, and cold nature. The audience understands the clear differences between the materials and the characters they depict, and how these stage symbols reflect the realities of war. The theatre, in employing the form of the fairytale, with its clear moral message, shows the audience that they can find their strength through the nurturing love of adults. The scarier scenes in the tale are replaced by happy plot twists, showing the children that they deserve happiness even after experiencing trauma. Exploring and educating by using these simple yet complex themes and narratives is especially important during times of crisis. Experiencing puppetry in this way is important for children living through war like the children in Kharkiv's underground shelters.

Theatre that is a Voice: *I'm OK*

The third theme is giving one a voice through theatre. Communication about the topic of war with teenagers is difficult because of their liminal stage in life. They are a special audience: they are no longer children, but they are not yet adults. It is a challenge for Ukrainian society in general to talk about the war. Sometimes, even adults cannot accept their pain and understand how to cope with each other within a traumatized social context. Connecting with teenagers through theatre that is relevant to their lives is a special challenge already, exacerbated by the context of war.

Playwright Nina Zahozhenko, from Lviv, tried to give a voice to this special stratum of

society through the drama *I'm Ok*. Each character in this production is a reflection of a collection of experiences and circumstances in which Ukrainian teenagers found themselves after the Russian invasion. The first production of the play took place in the summer of 2022 at the Viktor Afanasyev Kharkiv Academic Puppet Theatre. The images-symbols from the puppet theatre became a successful tool through which the stories of the witnesses of the current war could inhabit the stage as powerful symbols of our collective experience, without excessive emotional representation. Through the stage images that *I'm Ok* produces, the production speaks to teenagers about their own values as well as the wider societal values that we continue to seek in order to preserve, both as a society and as individuals, even during wartime.

Observing interactions, recording individual conversations of real people, capturing dialogues heard at train stations, in city squares, in volunteer centers, the author compiled the story of four teenagers from the city of Bucha, a Ukrainian city that has undergone a brutal Russian occupation. The author shared this experience with similar urban contexts. Each character in *I'm OK* represents a collective image of different experiences and circumstances faced by Ukrainian teenagers in the context of Russian aggression. The story of Lisa (played by Katya Pinchuk) involves a long journey of displacement, first from her hometown and then from her country. In the first days of the full-scale war, she and her parents leave Bucha: they have no choice in the matter. Lisa is torn from her world, from her friends, from her school, her city, her hometown. No one asked her opinion. But she is eventually rescued. The story of Sashko (played by Yakiv Ozerov) is similarly complicated. It is another story of displacement; the teenage boy is forced to leave his home for a second time; he had first evacuated from his native Donetsk in 2014, when the Russians began to occupy the eastern lands of Ukraine and created "imaginary republics." The story of Mike (played by Danyil Nikiforov) is a tragic story of extreme teenage angst. Mike is a character with a boiling anger and a desperate sense of dignity that pushes him to direct his own resistance towards the enemy. But what can a teenager with a Molotov cocktail in his hand do against an enemy armed to the teeth? A fourth protagonist on whose behalf the story is told (played by actress Lilia Oseychuk) lives through the occupation, residing in the

basement of the hospital where her mother works, a long walk from the bombed-out city, which is being targeted by checkpoints. In the end, she and her mother manage to escape the occupation.

The first performance of *I'm OK* took place in the summer of 2022 at the Victor Afanasiev Academic Puppet Theatre of Kharkiv. Since then, the theatre has hardly hosted performances above ground; its shows mostly take place in the basements of various locations. The director of *I'm OK*, Oksana Dmitrieva, creates a powerful image by using wooden cubes as an expressive metaphor for the play's characters. The director borrowed this technique of giving a simple stage object such symbolic power from the world of animation and, of course, the puppet theatre. The image of the wooden cubes permeated the entire performance; the cubes were not animated, but instead were a powerful symbol of the most valuable things we want to keep with us forever. The characters carry these cubes in their backpacks, their "anxiety backpacks," which are filled with everything that is important to each character. For Ukrainians displaced and harmed by war, this is a very expressive and recognizable symbol—the "suitcase-home"—in which you put your whole house and life. The cubes are like the bricks of your home. Throughout the production, the actors play with these objects: the cubes become the last loaf of bread, or a city that is being rebuilt and falling apart, imaginary walls of protection during air raids, even Molotov cocktails. Wooden cubes in this way are like a "proto-puppet" in this piece of object theatre. They are also part of a child's game, something so real and material that it brings characters back to a normal way of life, a life removed from trauma, back to intrinsic and deeply held values. The image of the cubes as symbols of identity-forming objects is an accurate image of life lived in a war zone, a simple yet clear metaphor for the audience to read.

In *I'm OK*, the audience learns about the background and ongoing stories of the teenagers in fragments, mostly by guessing what their whole life is like from these bits and pieces. However, no one needs any explanations; everyone in the audience recognizes this existence and understands how these stories are resolved. The play is not so much about the stories themselves, but more about what is happening inside

each teenager, how each manages to live through this devastating period of their lives and that of their country.

The director used Brechtian distancing effects in the play in several ways. First, almost all the dialogue is presented through phone messages read out by the actors. The friends continue to communicate and share events from their lives through their phone correspondence. The actors vocalize the words emotionlessly, as messages. The topics the characters talk about, so far removed from the reality of an ordinary teenager's life outside of war, was unerringly captured by the artistic choice of the emotionless readings. The audience experienced emotion due to the contrast between the way in which this production's content and form were intertwined. The characters voiced these monologues, each expressing their own pain from the loss of home, friends, dreams, and life. Other moments of detachment in the play were the original songs sung by the actress Lilia Oseichuk. She sang moving lyrics between the dialogues, which captured the heroine and the actors' emotions outside of the reality of the play's worldbuilding. The identity of the character and the actress merge into one, because the songs were Lilia's own very personal reflections on the events of the war. Elements of distancing oneself from images, absorbing one's own emotional experience through song, allow the play to maintain a balance between emotions and rational perception. This method gave the audience an opportunity to hear the voice of teenagers confronted by this war, to explore their journeys, and to understand the challenges and problems they face. Importantly, the production went through these stages of the play in quite a restrained and delicate manner, without retraumatizing its audience by overplaying emotional content. The performance was also unique in that it was told to teenage audiences by young performers. The actors were students of the I. Kotlyarevsky Kharkiv National University of Arts. They were about the same age as the characters in the drama, who had gone through many similar experiences as themselves. This was their own unique voice in this harsh reality of war, represented through their brand of theatre.

Theatre that Heals: *Monster Opera*

The fourth theme is theatre that can heal. Theatre for adults is increasingly becoming a platform for reflections on the war experience in Ukraine. Since this experience of war is very traumatic, the issue of therapy or using theatre in the skilled hands of a specialist is extremely important. This trend of therapy through theatre is also developing in the field of theatre for children and teenagers. This is what the project *Monster Opera* (based upon the texts of Shakespeare) looks to be, performed by children whose parents are currently at the front fighting in the war. *Monster Opera* is an attempt to give a voice to children; to give them the opportunity to speak about their experiences with the help of Shakespeare's colorful characters; and to transform their traumas into theatrical art, as positively as possible. The art therapy project is led by the British composer and teacher Nigel Osborne, together with students of the Faculty of Culture and Arts of the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv and the Faculty of Theatre Art of the Ivan Khotliarevskyi National University of Kharkiv. Kateryna Ostapovych, a teacher at the Faculty of Culture and Arts in Lviv, supervised the project from the Ukrainian side; she was also responsible for the musical accompaniment. The participating children created their own puppet characters for the play, with artist Nataliya Rudenko-Kraevska helping them with this aspect of their play.

Initially, the narratives were to be based upon Shakespearean plots. But eventually the children wrote their own stories. The resulting narrative explored the struggle between Dignity and Nothingness, noble Love and cruel Hate. The children used allegorical characters like these to form their own unique personal narrative. While the plot is simple, during the process of creating the show, the young participants pondered the play's meaning, searched for the appropriate images, created metaphors for their emotions, and, together, understood that anxieties as well as joys can be shared. The next stage in the project was to first imagine and then create on paper the main characters of their play. This was the process for the children's designs, based upon which, with the help of adult artists, life-size puppets were created. Since it was essential that the play's themes be clear, the puppets, made from found materials or

recycled trash, were gigantic. The project employed a method of art therapy that was two-fold: first, it enabled the children to tell their story, filling the narrative with their own emotions and feelings; and, second, it allowed them to externalize and then present their story to the audience through the images, through the puppets. In this way, all the complex emotions that are communicated during the performance are transferred to the puppets, without causing additional trauma to the children themselves through their participation in the performance. Externalizing the emotions via the puppet made it safer for the participants to explore the trauma expressed in their story. Of course, in an art therapy theatre project such as this, the process of preparing the play is very important, sometimes more important than the finished show and its performance. After all, the purpose of such work is to provide children with an opportunity for a positive means of release, of catharsis, from the experienced trauma. And, at the same time, a way to reveal and share their own experiences in order to better understand their emotional responses to trauma. This gives the children the opportunity to express their emotions together, be connected and supported by each other and with others involved in the production, including their audience. Such support and acceptance were important outcomes of their play and its performance.

In different ways, using various forms and finding appropriate approaches, the theatre continues its valuable conversation with children and teenagers about the war and about their experiences dealing with the resulting trauma. And the story of theatre performances and art processes continues, despite the war. It is evident that Ukrainian theatre for children and adolescents in the context of war is working in a variety of directions, employing relevant strategies, including puppetry. The themes of how theatre is addressing war that emerged through this research are the following: theatre creates narratives provoked by the war experience that are relevant to the lives of the young; theatre protects by providing a place of shelter, a safe space away from violence; theatre is a voice for the young to express their trauma and the issues that are close to their own lives, which they can share with each other; and theatre heals by sensitively using therapeutic art processes to help alleviate the trauma experienced by Ukraine's youth in a time of war.

The first theme explored examples of productions in which Ukrainian theatre groups build narratives generated by the circumstances and experiences of war. An important outcome of the analysis of this theme is that the narratives convey the idea of the cruelty and inhumanity of war but skillfully avoid glorification. In speaking about the war and its consequences, Ukrainian theatres try to be frank and honest with young audiences; they strive to be correct in their depiction of war. But it is very important that these narratives do not intimidate young audiences. Therefore, it is essential for theatre-makers to be responsible and extra careful in what is presented on stage (be it in an actual theatre or a makeshift one, such as a bomb shelter). It is equally essential not to romanticize the war.

The second theme explored in this article, theatre as protection, focused upon the experiences of Ukrainian theatre groups. During the first months of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops, their theatre buildings were re-classified as shelters and volunteer centers for people fleeing the bombing. Actors, directors, and all theatre staff were thus now engaged in routine daily tasks: accommodating people, cooking, and searching for necessary items. At the same time, theatre artists found the strength to come back to young audiences with their performances, their shows. This is how the phenomenon of subway theatre or theatre in the gray areas of war emerged. This kind of theatre tried to comfort and distract children and teenagers from the horrific reality, protecting their mental state, away from the violence.

Theatre that is a voice is about stories and their performances that try to broadcast the experiences of Ukrainian youth and teenagers from the stage, so their stories can be heard. *I'm Ok* by Kharkiv student actors was an especially effective example of such performances in this context. The age and experience of the student actors was in tune with the characters in their play, which greatly enhanced the play's messages and impact.

The last theme—theatre's capacity to heal—was explored through an example of art therapy's theatre projects. In such projects, thanks to theatre-therapy practices, the

participants had the opportunity to work through their experiences, write their own story, and then share it with an audience. Such practices are important because we can see a positive impact on the participants' mental well-being. Although it is difficult to measure this impact right now, the stories shared and experienced together by children, facilitated by adults, adds to the participants' confidence, with the possibility of releasing some of the lived trauma. Psychologists who work with children and adolescents at different stages are also actively involved in such projects to lessen the impact of war trauma.

Although theatrical performances are ephemeral, they do have the power and force of consciously presenting shared lived experiences, which can be transformative, with the potential for building positive spaces for both participants and audiences. The puppet theatre of Ukraine is attempting this courageous task of both protecting and healing through engaging young people positively in its practice.

^[1] Дмітрієва О. (2022) Як я зламала власні табу. Інтерв'ю Гарбузюк М. *Proscenium*. № 1-3 (62-64). С. 100.