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“Hereafter, in a better world than this, I shall desire more love and knowledge of you”: Kelly Hunter on Art, Healing, Trauma and Working with Ukrainian Families. A Conversation with Darya Lazarenko and Imke Lichterfeld

In this interview, acclaimed actress and theatre director Kelly Hunter, MBE, artistic director of Flute Theatre and creator of the Hunter Heartbeat Method, shares her insights on the transformative power of art and the theatre as a healing place for individuals with trauma, drawing on her experiences working with Ukrainian families in Sofia, Bulgaria, between 2022 and 2024. Hunter discusses the rewards of using sensory games within the framework of her heartbeat method as a medium for emotional expression and connection, highlighting how creative engagement helped provide a sense of community and hope in times of crisis.

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Darya Lazarenko: I first heard about Kelly Hunter from Professor Michael Dobson several years ago. Professor Nataliya Torkut, the Head of the Ukrainian Shakespeare Centre, and I sent Kelly an email saying how impressed we were with the work she was doing but I could never imagine that we would meet under such circumstances. And to tell you the truth it was some kind of magic because Kelly appeared exactly when she was most needed and it was the moment when we thought that nobody could help us, when we felt completely at a loss. When the war started, Nataliya called me and said we needed to do something. We decided to start a fundraising campaign to be able to get medicine to elderly people who lived close to the front lines. And we didn't really know how to go about it. So, we created a Facebook page for the Ukrainian Shakespeare Centre, and we published an appeal there to everyone who could support us and donate money. This was the exact moment when by some wonderful magic Kelly appeared. The first thing that she helped us with was this fundraising campaign. And this is how we first came into contact.

Kelly was so supportive; she helped me pull myself together. It was also the moment when Ukrainian families began arriving in Bulgaria. The first families arrived by car, and they didn't have many warm clothes or toys because they had packed in a hurry. So, it was then that Andrii and Mariia Nikolov created a situational centre called "Open Doors" and the daycare centre for Ukrainian children here in Sofia and this was the place where it all began. And it all began with Kelly: she was the spark that started the whole "Flute for Ukraine" project.

We kept exchanging emails and as the 2022 Craiova Shakespeare festival approached, Kelly offered to come to Sofia and we started planning. We didn't have any resources at that moment but with the help of Andrii Nikolov and my colleague Georgi Niagolov we managed to organize transportation to Sofia for Kelly and her company. So, in May 2022, we played with the Ukrainian families at "Open Doors" and it was magical. I had never seen anything like that before.

Imke Lichterfeld: Should we take a step back and get to Kelly's version of the story. How did you get to that point when you first met?

Kelly Hunter: I had been running Flute Theatre for five or six years in 2022. People who know me well, quote that cliché about me that I am 'wired for war but living in peace'. I'm the kind of person who in an emergency becomes very calm and feels at home and knows what to do. The danger of it is that when there isn't an emergency, I tend to cause a crisis. Consequently, I work in Shakespeare and drama. I think what is important to say is that at that time we had just come out of COVID-19, and I had a very strong core of actors and an incredible assistant called Oscar, from Catalunya. When COVID-19 had struck in 2020, we had been touring in

Poland and Romania and we had been translating our production of *Pericles* into different languages and performing with autistic people, not in a war situation, but going where we felt the need might be greatest. I think this is how Dasha [Darya Lazarenko] and Nataliya [Torkut] first heard about us. So, when COVID-19 struck we just got very busy. We got good at strategizing, mobilizing, organizing, and keeping ourselves going. I adapted my sensory games, which use Shakespeare with people with autism, to be accessible online with one autistic person at a time. We did five online shows a day for 15 months, something like 980 online adapted shows and I kept the company going, my company of Spanish and English actors. It was an amazing story that we all went through together!

In the summer of 2021, we just got back into real spaces as a company. Six months later, in February 2022, the war broke out. I think we all knew that we had something to offer to people. In the event of a crisis and in the event of human emergency, we could find a way – “find a crack and the light comes in”¹ – to adapt ourselves to offering our deceptively simple way of making Shakespeare live for people who find themselves in dire circumstances. I call it simple because I’ve created a way of using theatre that doesn’t need any production values, it doesn’t need a set or extra lights, it simply needs the actors’ bodies, souls, hearts, and minds to be present in the circle – the kind of theatre Shakespeare created his plays for.

I also had an extraordinary company, and we had all been through that pandemic, working remotely online together. Everybody was so cohesive and so strong. We were working on the production of *Pericles* which for me has always resonated so deeply – this idea of people at sea, fleeing from tyrants, losing their loved ones, saying to God: “Why do you make us love your goodly gifts, and snatch them straight away?” At the centre of the play is an exploration what war and grief do to people and in Act 5, the play offers what all people desire, which is to witness an inconceivably beautiful family reunion and to behold impossible dreams coming true.

This play has always been right at the heart of my soul and it was such a pleasure to be doing it. At the same time, I felt goosebumps, because there were these people from Ukraine, whose stories mirrored the story of *Pericles*, with whom we were in contact, and we had something so strong to offer them. So, it seemed, *Pericles* style, the universe had somehow brought us together. I don’t normally say things like that, I’m a very practical person, I find solutions to obstacles, etc., but this play had taught me to follow what happens next. Whom have you met? Follow them! This is what *Pericles* does, and Thaisa, and Marina.

2022, in February, the terrible war breaks out, I was watching television and reading the news and without hesitation, I asked Michael Dobson for Nataliya’s

¹ Hunter refers to Leonard Cohen’s famous *Anthem*: “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light comes in.”

email and got in touch with her that night; I guess I watched television in the morning and then I was emailing Nataliya asking what we could do. She said: “We need gloves, my son is fighting, they are soldiers, and everyone needs gloves and food, etc.” I am good at fundraising at a grassroots level. It’s a pain in every bit of your body, but you have got to do it. We got busy with that. And we found our purpose.

Meanwhile, we were preparing our mainstage production of *Pericles* to go to the International Shakespeare Festival in Craiova, Romania. So, as Dasha said, I just looked at the map and saw that Craiova is in the south of Romania and Sofia is in the north of Bulgaria, near enough to drive between the two. It is like *Pericles* turning up on the coastline of Mytilene where Marina happens to live. It seemed like the most obvious thing to do, and I remember writing that to you, Dasha, and I remember thinking I could come. “I’ll come and see you” and then at the end of the email I thought, “No, no, no, what am I talking about? We should all come. We should just do this,” and everyone just said yes. We didn’t get paid for that week; we just volunteered our services. To be clear, we were funded to do the big festival in Romania and then we gave our services free for the extra week in Bulgaria with the refugees. Everyone without hesitation said: “Of course, we’ll come.”

And this is how this great adventure began. We were picked up by three complete strangers: myself and nine actors – it’s a lot of people – and all our cases, and our instruments. Again, it was like the play *Pericles*, taking a journey in faith. We were going to be performing in Russian which we had never done before. We had done a lot of translating our performances into different languages, but Russian is very different. Dasha had sent these amazing, perfectly recorded Russian clips, with all the lines of *Pericles*, and how to say ‘hello’ and ‘we stand up’ and ‘we sit down’ – and we had these on our WhatsApp. We wanted to pronounce this well and that was hard. Russian was hard. But we were practicing.

Plus, we were doing our double *Pericles* performances: at the main stage at the Craiova festival and with the Romanian families with autism from ANCAAR, who had welcomed us with open arms, warm bread, salt, and vodkas – they are truly beautiful people. We were doing those performances in Romanian. So, our brains and bodies were very active, and therefore we were at our best; I know for myself that when you’re challenged, and you’re given something really purposeful to do, it is amazing what can be achieved. Especially when you have a team around you, it’s an amazing feeling, so much fun, and, to be honest, it was a gift for us. So, Georgi and two other drivers arrived in Craiova and off we went: three or four of us in each car with all our bags. One of the cars got lost and ended up back in Craiova three hours later, but they somehow arrived in Sofia first. It was funny, great stories as you can imagine. We crossed the Danube and into those mountains we went.

We arrived very late at night, and then stayed up, practicing Russian. The next day, you [Darya] and Georgi took us up the Vitosha mountain and you looked

after us. And there was always food, there were always so many welcoming treats for us everywhere we went. And you sat with us on that mountain, everyone was very tired, and then Tash [Natasha Howard, one of the actors], beautiful Tash, fell over and had a massive bruise on her leg. We got our Russian to some kind of a comprehensible degree and then the next day we went to the children's museum: we performed *Pericles* for autistic people sitting in our circle with Ukrainian refugees. Some of them had autistic children and others were there for reasons of their displacement by the war. There were no filters for who should come and who shouldn't come. The door with Flute Theatre is always just open. And a lot of families came. We did two shows that day.

My overriding memory is of reaffirming that if children are given a space to play, they will do so, they will play in their own way. The families started to feel that they had, at last, a breath to take and a chair or a cushion to sit on. It's exactly the same witnessing the reactions of the families of many autistic people. When I first meet them they are living their lives in this terrible trauma of being told there is something wrong with their child and it will never get better and that there are going to be problems forever and then they come into this theatre space, which is a healing, womb-like space where their children can express themselves in their own way and a feeling of relief and belonging sweeps over them. The feeling of relief existed in both circles – the inner circle of children playing with us but also that outer circle of families and parents who had undergone unimaginable trauma, suffering, and anxiety with not knowing what was coming next. It felt to me like I had come here so that I could create this safe space. It felt like a gift. Out of this horror, there had been a gift for me so that I could give back the thing that I was already doing.

Darya: Parents approached me afterwards to talk to me – not only about the way they responded to Kelly's performance and playing with Flute Theatre, but also to the relief they felt because it was so important for them. When they arrived in Sofia, they felt stressed all the time. Children started playing very soon but they were not loud, they were very quiet, sitting around rather than running around. And with Kelly, they felt free to play, they felt that they were allowed to be themselves, to smile, and to be alright again. But there was something more because some of the parents who approached me several days after playing with Kelly and Flute said that the most important thing for them was that it was the first time that they saw their children genuinely have fun because they were treated as individuals and as equals. They were seen, heard, accepted, and included into the game as equal human beings, and they were even allowed to take the lead.

One of the best things about Flute is that every actor is present in the moment and often allows the child to lead in the game. When children started helping actors

out with the Russian language, slightly correcting or giving hints, just helping to do what they could in a very nice, friendly, and supportive manner, a synergy was created. It was lovely. And the parents were so touched. One of the mothers said that it was the first moment in her whole life that she was truly enjoying herself looking at her child having fun and being completely accepted. In therapy sessions, the framework is a little bit different, and the relationship is different. It is not a relationship between equals having fun. Here, they finally got to experience this – being able to be proud of their own child. I think this was something new for many parents. And it was a transformative experience. One of the mothers said that it had changed her whole life, because before that she used to stay at home a lot, she didn't go out with her child, she used to be quite shy, and she didn't want people to point fingers at her child. But one day of Flute changed her whole experience. She just saw that it could be done in a completely different way, in this accepting and friendly manner, where everyone is equal, and everyone is having fun together. I think it was a life-changing experience for all of us.

Kelly: I get asked a lot, and sometimes quite aggressively, whether what I do is therapy or art – as if these two things are completely separate. And I get accused sometimes, especially in the UK, of doing therapy and calling it art. That's interesting. I never thought about this, but I've been forced to recently because I keep being asked this question.

Art should be therapeutic. Just art. Just looking at a painting. Therapeutic means "I feel better, or I feel different, or I understand myself, or I understand the world, or I just have a feeling." Whatever small incremental thing has happened is a kind of therapy. I think people have got far too bogged down in therapy for autistic people, people with special needs, people who've suffered grief and trauma. It's so transactional because it's done by someone who's got an answer in some way and therefore is kind of better than you or they are separate from you and they will get you to do some exercise. And you do it, and now you're meant to feel something, and then you get judged and evaluated, and it gets written down somewhere. I've seen this happen. That's not art.

So, my way of working is a living theatre practice. I believe in the power of theatre to transform peoples' lives in a therapeutic way. I do not claim that it's drama therapy or music therapy but it's amazing how many people say they were so much better than with anything else they had tried. Flute is not in competition with anyone. We're just doing what we do, other people do what they do. There's an industry of therapy. And I do not belong in that industry.

Imke: I would like us to talk about challenges that you face, not just language problems but traumas, and the way you deal with them and the method that you work with.

Kelly: The work is the challenge. I made something that only comes to life when there is a challenge, a resistance, somebody who is locked away, who isn't going to respond naturally to an impulse, who may take longer, much longer to respond in their own way. That's what this work is. If there's no resistance to it, it's finished in about 10 minutes. The sensory games are repeated, they are based on repetition of rhythm and movement, whereby someone who is locked away from expressing something they want to express is given the time and space to practice and repeat with spontaneity something that is pleasurable, jolly and fun. And that pleasure is not only just humorous, it can also be the pleasure of experiencing a game of grief and loss within a safe environment. For instance, we have a game where we act out the moment that Thaisa loses Pericles, in which you stretch out your hands and you 'lose' the person and you spin on your own in the space, and then you physically catch them again and you hug each other as tightly as you can until you lose them again. This kind of amazing cathartic experience is pleasurable.

The games have a very set and physical pattern: the actors repeat the games, invoking the feeling that each time they play, they have never done it before. In this way, little by little that challenge, that resistance transforms into something else. It just will. Through using repetition, something will always happen inside the repetition, and I love that, it's like oxygen to me. That's what I really enjoy doing – getting into the rhythm of one or two games with a group of people who seem disinterested or unhappy or locked away, or just not in the mood, and then creating an environment, creating a space whereby we explore something, and the walls of resistance fall away. So, I don't see it as difficult because that's just the very thing we do. And that's the gift: being present in the room with someone who opens up, and that doesn't mean they've done it the way we want them to do it, it's just that 'something' has happened, some sound, some movements, some light in the eyes, some version of what we are doing is now owned by them. And to witness these moments, to be honest, is like witnessing a birth. And that's what I believe Shakespeare does, his plays allow us to come back to life, to remember ourselves. So, in a way the sessions and the performances that we have done over the years with refugees and their families were some of the greatest I will ever do with Flute Theatre because there was so much resistance, so much reason why it shouldn't work, why the trauma will just be in the room. The challenge was the gift; without the challenge the work that I make just doesn't exist; so the bigger the challenge, the more profound the work.

The truth is that the real challenge is a very grown-up and boring problem: funding for this work. That's the truth. And no one really wants to talk about that. But if I had more money, I would do it so much more. In 2022, we came that first time without paying anybody, acting on instinct and impetus but we can't continue to do that forever. The challenge of keeping this going is an administrative one. And then you get into the politics of who should be paying for this, what's the worth of it, and all of these things. A long-term project doesn't come from air; it comes from organization.

Darya: I was thinking about something that Kelly said about these games waking us up. This is a very exact metaphor. They are dreams that make us wake up to the immediacy of our lives because we constantly live either in the past being depressed and saddened by what has happened, or in the future being anxious about what is going to happen. When you play with Kelly, you're in the moment. Even if you don't want to, you're at first unwillingly drawn into this whirlpool of energy, you feel involved from the very first moment. Kelly has this mild but very effective approach to those kids who are reluctant to join, who are just running around or sitting somewhere in the corner. They are not pressured into anything. They are just there, and they are allowed to be – to be themselves – there, but also to be a part of the whole of it. And all of them eventually start participating and playing. And it's magical. This was a transformative experience for me, too. I am one of those people who benefited most from Kelly's coming over to Sofia because it changed my life, too.

This being in the moment allowed families to not forget about the war, but to switch to something else because you cannot change your focus unless you are given an alternative strong emotion you can focus on. They got this chance to focus on something new. War was still there, it couldn't go away, but they could finally focus on something else. And that experience helped us overcome all the challenges, including those of an organisational kind.

On different days, we worked in different locations and of course we had to deal with all kinds of situations. Another challenge that we faced was the language. When Kelly first came to Sofia, we worked with Russian because the families that had arrived were primarily from the Eastern part of Ukraine. But some of the children didn't want to speak Russian at all. And the next time Flute came, they had to learn a new translation, into Ukrainian. So, eventually, they mastered the words for the games in two languages. And they learned a bit of Bulgarian, too, because some of the Bulgarian families came to play with us. And it was wonderful and important – all of the children playing together. It was a lovely moment. We were so happy to be doing it together, as if we were carried along by a wave.

Kelly: This idea of using Shakespeare's dreamlike poetry for these productions for autistic audiences, or people who have fled a war, is key. We use moments in Shakespeare that are essential to the experience of being alive. The work is based primarily on finding moments where four key words – eyes, mind, reason, and love – come together and as in a dreamlike montage, you just find yourself in that experience of the 'seeing mind' and the 'loving eye', the deep beautiful poetry of Shakespeare.

It struck me that, of course, there is also the deeply beautiful political nature of *Hamlet*; people who are living in a war can review their lives through watching *Hamlet* and reflecting on politics. I'm a pretty political person but this strand of my work is entirely about exploring the unconscious dreamlike world of Shakespeare, not politics. It just struck me how remarkable the plays are because they express at least these two things – the conscious political reflections and the unconscious state of being – at the same time.

At Flute Theatre, I barely use any narrative in the work for autistic people, we can jump into unconscious deep seas of experience and piece them together with a tiny thread of story. No one ever says, "Oh, but how did he get there? Who's the King currently?" They just want to play. Yet you can also use Shakespeare's extraordinarily acute political vision to illuminate the world for audiences to use as a mirror up to their lives, this is what many theatre makers do and should do and always will, I hope. But there's a whole community of people who can't access that approach: autistic people who need 24/7 care for the rest of their lives are unlikely to access that, children are unlikely to access that and not everyone wants to; people who fled a war might not *want* to do that. So, I offer these people a potentially sublime experience of Shakespeare through using his plays as an unconscious, dreamlike state where narrative is not the focus. My work with these marginalised audiences offers a direct and deeply emotional way into accessing and owning the plays that bypasses the politics and focusses on sensory experience. It's interesting because it's not that politics isn't emotional, but rather it's the dreamlike structure of our shows that explores how it feels to be alive and which frees you from narrative, just as in our dreams we don't need to know how we got from one place to another because our dreams set us down in new places using montage. The poetic dreamlike structure of our versions of the plays gives freedom.

Imke: Can I ask whether that goes hand in hand with the heartbeat method in the sense of the rhythmic quality of the language itself? So, is this a kind of combination: You find the rhythm and you choose some of those words?

I had the privilege of witnessing your work with autistic children in Craiova with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and you performed this with *Pericles*; both of them are plays where, at the end, everything gets resolved. There is a dreamlike quality

to them. And there's some kind of harmony that is soothing and peaceful. Could you elaborate a little more on the workshops themselves: how do this dreamlike quality of the plays and the heartbeat come together?

Kelly: The heartbeat rhythm underpins very specifically how we offer a transition from one space to another, how we begin and how we end. Autistic people or refugees, it is safe to say, are in some kind of trauma. Autistic people have said to me, "My life is like a 24/7 panic attack that just never ever ends." I think that state of panic is going to be the same for someone who must flee their country where the whole family unit is experiencing that never-ending panic attack, sleep is constricted, and therefore critical thinking is impacted.

Shakespeare's plays are written in iambic pentameter and there's this underlying heartbeat; it is endlessly changing and showing us the ever-changing feelings of the different characters but [the heartbeat] is there all the time. The heartbeat is the first sound you hear in the womb before you are born, it's the most womb-like sound, or warm, comforting rhythm that we can make. So, when we sit and make our heartbeat 'hellos', we are offering our calm interior rhythm to somebody else without saying "Oh, please, relax" or "That's okay," – just by doing it, just by creating that womb-like environment. Once we have set that up, we can always go back to it; and if the room is a little dysregulated or people's emotions, or attention, are going all over the place we can always just literally do the heartbeats to come back to the circle. So, it's always there, just like the iambus is always there in Shakespeare's plays.

With the choosing of the words for each game, each sensory game contains a little bit of Shakespeare's dialogue. For example, Thaisa says "He could not please me better," when she first sees Pericles. The line has a little culmination of rhythm at the end of it, where the heartbeat races on the word 'better', reflecting the skipping of her own heart as she looks at the man she has just fallen in love with. Non-verbal people can join in with the plosive 'B' sound of the word 'better'. I'm always finding a line or two from the text where the dramatic poetry releases rhythm, melody, feeling, and narrative in one go. So, the phrases I choose for the actors, children, and participants to say and to repeat, as if they have never said it before, do use the heartbeat rhythm, but it's important to say that the rhythm does not constrict the experience. It's not, 'you must go booboom-booboom-booboom-booboom-booboom', in a steady unchanging drone like some bad actor. On the contrary, our heartbeats change all the time with our feelings and so do the rhythms and feelings of Shakespeare's characters.

It's not just the rhythm of Shakespeare that underpins this work, but also his sound patterns. At the centre of *The Tempest*, for instance, which we also did with the refugee families when we came back in 2023, is the character of Caliban who

says, "This island's mine!" Three words. I have translated these three words into so many languages and across the world many non-verbal people simply make a humming sound 'Hmmmmm' on the word "mine", thereby claiming it as their possessive pronoun and expressing Caliban's territoriality and the innate feeling of needing to own your own space if it has been taken away from you. They are using what I call the 'mother' sound 'm': it's the warmest consonant that you can make.

A lot of the time it genuinely doesn't matter if the participant is verbal or not because they are given the opportunity to embody ecstatic moments through the sound patterns offered by Shakespeare. This hum is incredibly powerful, an incredibly powerful experience. Shakespeare has given all of this to us to play with – the way that the sound and the rhythm land together to explode the character into life. It's those moments of language that I then put into each sensory game.

Darya: This works incredibly well even after Flute and Kelly have left. Families keep playing on their own at home using the songs and the games as a way to brighten up their day or to calm the child down. And singing 'Hello' or 'Pryvit' is the first reaction that every child has to Kelly's name. These kids become amazingly cheerful when they hear Kelly's voice, they are so happy to see her, it's such a wonderful connection. And together we managed to create a whole network of such connections.

When Flute came for the second time, together with the Ukrainian educational hub in Sofia and the Ukrainian Shakespeare Centre, we organised an online broadcast for Ukraine. Many specialists and families also joined from different regions of Ukraine. During their third and fourth visit, Kelly and Josh [Welch] taught specialists and parents how to go through the steps and to take the child with you. The whole energy was so catchy. Everyone was having fun no matter what their age was. And the families I keep in touch with are so excited about the possibility of meeting them again in the future.

Kelly: It is interesting that what you've picked up on is that everything's okay at the end of the Flute shows like *Dream* and *Pericles* and they have this resolution and that's true. With *Pericles* we offer a deeper experience of grief and loss because obviously you have at the centre of that play the big storm with people drowning. I have enjoyed offering autistic people and refugees the opportunity of showing their feelings of unhappiness – as well as sharing joy and pleasure. I think one can fall into the trap of just wanting to make everything better for the people who are suffering and that's no bad thing. But what I have really learned over these decades is that it's very important to offer an opportunity to be real and to give a space where suffering can be expressed.

My next project is *King Lear*. This play has been in my life for a long time. Having done *Pericles* – with our displaced people and our autistic people – which touches on grief, I saw that if you offer these games of pain and suffering people really want them. So, it seems like a next natural step for me is *Lear*. We are going to do *Lear* for and with autistic people. We are going to make a new set of games using those parts of the play that we choose to be most resonant. We will give people the opportunity to do the storm scene, to play the Fool, and expose themselves to the elements – in that way this just seems like a gift. I am also going to do a mainstage production at the same time with my company of actors with the idea that everyone is going to be the Fool. So there will be seven or eight Fools on stage in a dystopian world in which they will play all the parts with the heightened emotions of the play running through their bodies, souls, and voices.

Imke: *Pericles* touches on grief and then *King Lear* does so much more. You were talking about the cathartic effect earlier on. There is no harmonious end. Will there be the fun of the Fool but also the idea of exploring suffering?

Kelly: I think there is more peace in truth. No-one wants to be lied to ever again. The truth is that the world is a tragic one. As a theatre maker, you need to give something with truth and authenticity and let the participants or audience receive it. I'm going to find a way that gives cathartic experience without patronizing anybody or trying to package things up in some kind of way that isn't honest. But of course, I am not setting out to upset anybody. What I have learnt is that people want more truth. People I work with don't want to be patronized; they want to empower themselves with these experiences. So, I will find a way. My endeavour is not to upset anybody, but to allow people to express that they may be upset.

Imke: Would you like to comment on the possible hopes to work in Ukraine in the future because the traumas of the war will rest in this country for a very long time?

Kelly: I want more than anything to set up a series of courses and a company of Ukrainian people who can use this way of working and pass it on to others for the next generations. I think about it a lot. We want to set up more courses, go to as many places as we possibly can, and pass on how to play these sensory games, and create these productions. There's going to be untold suffering across the world as a legacy of the current wars and the inherent damage that has been done to the generations of families. Ukraine is obviously one of those places. Through my

direct experiences since 2022, I feel very close to the country, and I want to work out the best way to pass on the Hunter Heartbeat method.

There are autistic people everywhere, and in some parts of the world, there are people who have been profoundly damaged by war, so to be honest, if I had a budget at my fingertips, I know exactly what I would do to spread the work. Meanwhile, wherever you are in Europe or the world, if you run a group or teach a course, please invite Flute Theatre to come and teach you and your students, your drama students, your actors, your parents, your teachers, or your therapists how to play these games and create these productions.

In this next phase of Flute Theatre, I want to create these worldwide courses as a legacy. The second edition of my book *Shakespeare's Heartbeat* is coming out in September, and I've written something about the experience with Ukrainian refugees in the book, but I want to write something more substantial that focuses on the specifics of the work. I believe that Dasha and I must write about this experience we've had in the last three years and about the *Pericles* games. To sum up, it doesn't need me to describe the untold tragedy and trauma of what has happened in Ukraine, but I hope I can continue to offer a place of healing with the way that I've used theatre through this time.

Imke: This multiplication especially for teaching degree students, who are now often involved with inclusive work at schools, would help in their work on a small scale, as well as on a larger scale of work with severely disabled or severely traumatised people.

Kelly: You don't even need to adapt because with every single performance of Flute, you adapt to who is there in the room. In any group of autistic people, you are going to find an amazing spectrum of needs, which is true about any group of human beings including those who are refugees. A knowledge of the fundamentals of the methodology, having those skills at your fingertips, and realising you can do it, will be a real gift.

I have also learned through this work that loyalty and just turning up is an invaluable quality and Shakespeare's plays teach us that. You can't be around Shakespeare for a lifetime and not be a better person. I've learned the following in the world of autism: it's nice to do a Flute Theatre performance once with an autistic person but it's profoundly transformative to continue to share the performances for eight years.

With the Ukrainian families whom we have known for three years, our loyalty to them has been the thing that made the difference. We first arrived in May 2022 and then we came back in October 2022 when everything was still so

traumatised and rough and ready; and there we were again: the same group of actors. I remember the parents coming in and one of the mothers, Victoria, literally jumping with joy, “Ah, they’re back!” It is very important to realise that the return visits continue the journey of transformation.

The big question is the next generation of people who have experienced this war in Ukraine. Their feelings go somewhere, and their sense of themselves as more than victims of this horror must change. Otherwise, it will be just self-perpetuating for ever and ever. This is what Shakespeare’s late plays are about, aren’t they? Where is the forgiveness? The late plays ask how on earth human beings can begin to forgive each other because if we don’t, then we are stuck. I am fascinated by that as a question in my own personal life, and by the fact that Shakespeare wrote about it again and again as he got older and wiser. He realised that one of the profound things we are left with is how on earth do we begin to forgive.

I have been running *Flute* for ten years and we keep talking about what the next ten years will be like, and what legacy I would have created. I’d love for the healing power of theatre to be considered more normal and for people to know that healing is possible. We witness families playing these simple games with their locked-away children and finding a way to healing. Perhaps the answer is closer to us than we believe.

I think the work has only just begun; that’s the truth, that’s the actual human truth. I was given the gift to start something small; these families in Ukraine have experienced war and it’s caused a lifetime of trauma. The wounds are going to be there – so the work of healing has just begun. It feels like we need to make some smart long-term strategic plans to make good our dreams for a better world: “Hereafter, in a better world than this, I shall desire more love and knowledge of you.” I love this quote from *As You Like It* so much. If anything, I think theatre should be involved in trying to make a better world.