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Shelter from the Storm: Two Recent Shakespeare Stagings by the Ivano-Frankivsk Drama Theatre

Abstract

This paper examines two recent Shakespeare productions by the Ivan Franko National Drama Theatre staged in Ivan-Frankivsk, Ukraine: *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*. The classic tragedy is directed by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi, and the celebrated comedy by the actor Oleksii Hnatkovskyi, who also plays the title role in *Hamlet*. Both productions function as a shelter, in a literal and metaphorical sense. The *Hamlet* production opened in 2017 and became known for its use of a contemporary-sounding new translation by the Ivano-Frankivsk native, Yurii Andrukhovych, as well as the new basement stage adapted for the post-apocalyptic

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production. It soon literally became a bomb shelter, used as temporary housing for refugees from Eastern Ukraine, as a result of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. The staging of *Twelfth Night* as literally drama therapy in action consisted of a performance by Ukrainian soldiers utilising an abridged English text of the play. The performance served as a psychotherapeutic session and demonstrated the healing power of Shakespeare's plays.

The present article focuses on how this regional Ukrainian theatre has unexpectedly become a cutting-edge venue for Shakespeare performance and, more importantly, a spiritual and intellectual shelter for not only the audience, but also the performers.

Keywords: Shakespeare in Ukraine, theatrical adaptation, experimental theatre, Ivano-Frankivsk Theatre, Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi, Oleksii Hnatkovskyi.

In recent years, the Ukrainian theatre scene has undergone significant changes, in part due to the growing number of productions based on the works of William Shakespeare. This trend not only demonstrates a deep interest in classic texts but also opens up opportunities for new interpretations of Shakespeare's plays. They have become a tool for understanding Ukraine's postcolonial historical heritage, as well as a platform for discussing important political issues such as national identity, cultural revival, and the struggle for independence. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has undoubtedly exacerbated the decolonization theme in Ukrainian theatre discourse, raising the issue of identifying the aggressor country as an enemy. Theatre is becoming not only a means of aesthetic expression but also an important tool for social commentary, contributing to the formation of new narratives that reflect current issues in society. Productions of Shakespeare's plays are gaining new significance, providing directors and audiences with an opportunity to dive into deep philosophical questions, explore the dynamics of power, the relationship between the individual and society, and examine subtle facets of national identity in the face of current challenges. These productions have also become a powerful tool for collective awareness of the traumas and challenges faced by Ukrainian society, demonstrating how art can shape new values.

Within the diversity of Ukraine's contemporary Shakespearean scene, Ivan Franko National Drama Theater, in the city of Ivano-Frankivsk, has become a centre of innovation and experimentation, boldly transforming Shakespeare's texts into resonant, avant-garde performances. The theatre's productions of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* are an attempt to rethink classical themes in what Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi, the director and managing director of the theatre, calls "the post-apocalyptic world" (Кашперська [Kashperska]). The exploration of the Shakespearean tradition in the Carpathian region has served to demonstrate

the creative maturity of the theatre and its ability to work as a powerful tool for social change, cultural identification, and shared experience. The interpretive tradition established by the Frankivsk Drama Theatre is of interest not only to a local audience but also to the broader theatrical community, engaging theatre in cultural dialogue while popularizing, and integrating Ukrainian theatre into the global context. Maiia Harbuzyuk, a prominent Ukrainian theatre scholar who has made a significant contribution to the study of the history, theory, and practice of theatrical arts, particularly in the field of Shakespearean studies in Ukraine, has explored the post-apocalyptic motifs and avant-garde techniques in Derzhypilskyi's productions of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*. These performances have been transformed into spaces of artistic innovation and have become a societal reflection on the anxieties of a world in crisis. Nicoleta Cinpoes̃ has also highlighted the contribution of the Frankivsk Drama Theatre to global Shakespearean discourse (Cinpoes̃). She has focused on how the theatre's productions, particularly *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, have met with recognition at international Shakespeare festivals. Cinpoes̃ emphasizes how these performances resonate with global audiences, blending experimental artistry with deep cultural narratives. Both scholars position the Frankivsk Drama Theatre as an important player on the global theatrical stage, demonstrating its ability to combine Ukrainian cultural identity with universal themes in an innovative and meaningful way. The culmination and highlight of the above was the first Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival held in Ivano-Frankivsk from 17–23 June 2024.

The current article focuses on two of the theatre's productions which make use of the Ivan Franko Theatre site-specificity and the team's readiness to explore Shakespeare in wartime: an ultra-modern reading of *Hamlet: Drama per Musica*, directed by the theatre director Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi, and *Twelfth Night* directed by one of the company's leading actors Oleksii Hnatkovskiyi. The production of *Hamlet*, which premiered on 4 February 2017, opened a new page in the history of the theatre and became the starting point in the transformation of the Frankivsk Drama Theatre into an international performance centre. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, staged by the Frankivsk Drama theatre, is a unique current experimental rethinking of the classical message in the post-apocalypse. The play becomes a mirror of a society in crisis, but at the same time encourages reflection and dialogue with its own history, which gives new meanings to the struggle for recovery. Its purpose is to engage with the present moment and bring uneasy solace to the audience. The innovative staging of *Hamlet* was the result of a creative collaboration between the actors, the director and scenographer Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi, and young Ukrainian composers from the NOVA OPERA troupe, Roman Hryhoriv and Ilya Razumeiko. The composers had already collaborated on the dream opera *NepriOsti* based on a novel by Taras Prokhasko at the Porto Franko GogolFest in 2016. Their previous experience and Derzhypilskyi's vision

combined to create the production of *Hamlet* in the theatre's basement, which has, since 2022, also served as a bomb shelter.

In numerous interviews, Derzhytskyi has repeatedly emphasized the importance of this *genius loci* or spirit of place. He argues that the theater's engine room is a ready-made set for a performance in which the concrete slabs are part of a sanctuary at the intersection of different time periods, where meanings are resurrected, and one can easily stumble upon Yorick's skull if one starts digging (HeoOIIIEPA [Neo-opera]). This account is literally complemented by another cemetery story related to the location of the theatre on the site of the former city graveyard. Walking through the park behind the theatre, one can still see crypts and monuments to famous citizens, whose graves survived the destruction of the cemetery by the Soviet authorities attempting to erase any memory of Ukrainian identity. The location of the theatre and the history of the place was tied to the idea that medieval characters could be resurrected in the post-apocalyptic present by means of drama and musical theatre, in the genre of neo-horror opera. According to Derzhytskyi, theatre indeed resurrects people's fates and souls, therefore, this concept became the basis of the neo-horror opera *Hamlet* (HeoOIIIEPA [Neo-opera]).

At the time of the play's premiere, the Ivan Franko theatre had three main stages: a large one, a smaller one, and a separate stage area located on the main stage. The director, with his unexpected vision of the conceptual production of *Hamlet* in the horror genre, decided on a further venue: to use the theatre's basement as a stage. The abandoned space of a former engine room was thus transformed into a basement stage. V. Dutchak describes it as follows: "The basement stage has become a symbol of chaos with its indefinite space and dialectical premise of total transformation" (Дутчак [Dutchak] 8). The basement space is part of the conceptual stage design and an important element of the performance's perception. Its post-industrial character reinforces the sense of decay and apocalypse that permeates the production. It is difficult to imagine transferring this performance to another location, as the loss of the specific basement atmosphere would disrupt the key semantic and visual accents of the play, which are closely related to the specific location. Sergey Vasiliev comments on the director's groundbreaking achievement: "His new play is an underground show (which later turns into a drama of thought, a drama of revenge); and its internal genre is a musical tragicomedy, played out passionately and furiously" (Vasiliev 131). The phantasmagoric and dialectical aesthetics of the basement stage, with its timelessness and illusory nature, serve to reveal the main message, this being a study of Shakespeare's classical narratives in the post-apocalypse.

The explosive creative cooperation quickly sparked a powerful energy fuse and united a cohort of artists from different cities in Ukraine, who began to implement a hitherto unprecedented musical and theatrical project. The actors Irma Vitovska (Gertrude) and Anastasia Blazhchuk (Ophelia), both from the Kyiv National Academic Molodyy Theatre, Yuriy Khvostenko (Claudius), from Maria

Zankovetska National Academic Ukrainian Drama Theatre in Lviv, Dmytro Rybalevsky (Polonius), from National Academic Dramatic Ivan Franko Theatre in Kyiv, were invited and cooperated with local actors: Oleksii Hnatkovskiy (Hamlet), Ivan Blindar (Laertes), Yevhen Kholodniak (Fortinbras) and the witches-Erinyes (Halyna Barankevych, Nadiya Levchenko and Olesia Pasichniak) who the director borrowed from *Macbeth*. The Erinyes introduce Derzhypilsky's Shakespearean productions and serve as linking devices between them. The cast also included fourth-year students from the Institute of Arts of Vasyl Stefanyk Carpathian National University, who played zombie monks doubling as chorus and usherers. Despite their diversity of experience and job locations, the actors formed an ensemble of like-minded people capable of staging an experimental, almost Stoppardian, production: with the entrance of the Erinyes and the monks, all reality becomes an illusion. Their presence and engagement with the actors and the audience create the sense that the characters have been dead for a long time, only to be pulled into a deadly cycle of hell where they helplessly repeat the same pointless mistakes. In ancient Greek mythology, the Erinyes are ruthless pursuers of those who have committed heinous crimes, including those against the family, such as the murder of close relatives. The choice to introduce the Erinyes as instigators of the dramatic action accentuates the production's multilayered, symbolic tenor and adds depth and contrast to the tragedy. Hamlet, as performed by Oleksii Hnatkovskiy, becomes a multi-layered psychological experiment, in which he is both a naked nerve and a skilful manipulator, wearing in turn the masks of a madman, a harlequin, a hero, a victim, and sometimes taking off all the masks and talking directly to the audience. His division of himself was the result of operating in a broken, hysterical world, where there are no clear lines between good and evil. Hamlet is confused and frantic, lonely and frozen in the cold of the cemetery, melancholic and insane, on the brink of madness, but nevertheless remaining the most sober among his truly insane, sin-distorted relatives. The other characters, such as Polonius, Gertrude, and Claudius, demonstrate a certain caricatured grotesqueness, which emphasized their internal conflicts and metamorphoses, the total decline and degradation of the human soul. In contrast, Ophelia and Laertes are carefree, naive, and thus easily manipulated young people struggling to navigate through this world. Some of the original Shakespeare characters, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, were cut and this choice strengthened the production's focus on the conflict between blood relatives.

The stage imagery, created by the costume designer Lesya Holovach, strengthened the sense of a world out-of-joint. Dressed in Baroque costumes, with exaggerated wigs, punk-goth corsets and military elements, all the actors looked like participants in a parade of evil. Their expressive manner broke not only the barrier between classical and contemporary theatre, but also the fourth wall, opening up space for nightmarish repetition, where the viewer becomes a participant and where nothing

can be changed, as the tragedy unfolds over and over. One of the most memorable scenes involved Hamlet frying meat in a pan, cutting it into pieces with a knife and offering it to the people in the audience. Oleksii Hnatkovskiy conducted a sincere dialogue with the viewers about social problems and his own pain, but also inflicted a participatory response on unwilling spectators. According to Hnatkovskiy, staging the production in Ivano-Frankivsk broke down the established stereotypes about provincial theatres and their distance from contemporary trends. He also connected the project to post-revolutionary social processes, emphasizing that the production reflects on the relatively recent, still unprocessed, events of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity of 2014 and amounts to a unique phenomenon in the context of Ukrainian theatre (HeoOIIIEPA [Neo-opera]).

The production made use of a recent translation into Ukrainian by the local, internationally acclaimed writer Yurii Andrukhovych. As Dasa Kashperska comments on the translation: “You feel a sweet, viscous lexical density that you want to eat with a spoon, to decompose this rich aftertaste into separate shades. In his translation of *Hamlet*, two epochs are pulsating on the tongue – the sixteenth/seventeenth century and our twenty-first century” (Кашперська [Kashperska]). Andrukhovych’s interpretations of Shakespeare, which also include *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet*, are authoritative and popular with the Ukrainian theatre community. The modern Ukrainian language spoken by the play’s characters makes the text comprehensible to the audience and brings *Hamlet* closer to contemporary reality. Commenting on the innovative nature of the translation, Lada Kolomiyets posits that:

Andrukhovych radically modernizes the vocabulary and style of the work. His *Hamlet* turns out to be strewn with reminiscences, not only Shakespearean ones, but also contemporary ones from Andrukhovych’s own arsenal; and the image of Hamlet he created can rightfully be called a new Ukrainian Hamlet. (Коломієць [Kolomiyets])

Derzhypilskiy found inspiration for his staging in this new translation:

The main messages in the play, to be honest, we found in Yuriy Andrukhovych’s translation. I had read *Hamlet* many times in other translations, but this particular translation impressed me. It opened up completely different meanings, which Andrukhovych found and demonstrated from his own perspective. And we have tried to catch and reproduce that perspective. (Дутчак [Dutchak])

The neo-opera horror genre, in which music unites texture and content, is classical in its essence but deployed in atypical time and space dimensions. Only the director’s talent helped to maintain a balance between the musical and

dramatic textures in the production, preventing each from dominating the other. According to the theatre critic Anna Lipkivska, the director managed to enter into a dialogue with Shakespeare's text, without making a detour into the 400-year history of its interpretation, and "the synthesis of musical and dramatic factors in this *Hamlet* is fundamental in its conception and effective in its realization, and corresponds to the nature of Ukrainian theatre, which is musical and dramatic in nature, not just formal, in status" (Vasiliev 136). The composers of the NOVA OPERA formation presented an eclectic, original, distinctive musical score that integrates a variety of genres, from classical music to electronic, creating a soundscape that enhances the dramatic action. The orchestra introduced a six-piece instrumental ensemble: timpani, French horn, cello, double bass, percussion, and keyboards, supplemented by electronic music to dialogue with the text of the play. A more challenging task was addressed when developing the sound score for the performance, which was largely responsible for creating the atmosphere of horror. The composers organised a genuine sound laboratory, collecting various noise effects, such as the echo of voices, the noise of men's footsteps and women's heels, striking on metal rails, a frustrated piano, and the banging of the engine room, which became full-fledged elements of the play's score. In addition to the instrumental and noise components, the performance also includes vocal music, performed by the Erinyes, and a male quartet of monks. Thus, the musical score of the play is eclectic, woven from a variety of noise effects, with citations from various musical styles: Händel, Gregorian chants, electronic meditative motifs related to Schoenberg, and a Balkan 'um-tsa-tsa' from a Serbian wedding. It combines the neo-baroque and folklore, jazz and multi-layered electronics, rock and hip-hop, allusions to 1970s film music and gypsy motifs. The intertextual musical mixing of historical periods, genres, instruments, and past and present conventions, creates the sense of a time continuum in which much changes, but a sin committed centuries ago remains a sin and, thus, a crime which has to be accounted for.

The production received favourable reviews from theatre critics and was highly praised both in Ukraine and abroad. *Hamlet* headlined the International Shakespeare Festival in Gdańsk, Poland (2017) and, in 2018, the production won the first All-Ukrainian theatre Festival Award "GRA" for Best Experimental and Search Performance. In 2021, after a year-long break, the play underwent changes to the cast, among other things. After the full-scale invasion of 2022, the basement stage where *Hamlet* was performed turned into a bomb shelter, and the performance became part of the theatre and its Bomb Shelter project. On the sixteenth day of the war (11 March 2022), the Frankivsk Drama theatre performed *Hamlet* from the basement, streamed live on the Internet, as a sign of gratitude for the unprecedented support of the British people. During the first months of the war in 2022, the theatre continuously hosted internally displaced Ukrainian citizens who were evacuated from eastern and southern Ukraine. These people

had no idea where they would end up and were surprised that in Ivano-Frankivsk, in addition to shelter from the war, they were able to find shelter in a theatre, within Shakespearean productions. In June 2024, the theatre presented *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* at the First Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk.

In recent years, art therapy projects in Ukrainian theatre have met with increased interest and new relevance, especially in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The arts, including theatre, have become a means of healing, allowing people to relive the traumatic experience of war and express their emotions, traumas, and fears in a safe environment. The project ‘W’ *Veterans, Volunteers and William Shakespeare*, initiated in March 2018 by Ihor Kasyan, a veteran of the 95th Airborne Brigade, brought together volunteers and veterans of the Russian-Ukrainian war in a therapeutic theatre project. Kasyan, co-founder of the *English Among People* school, is convinced that there is a critical lack of English-language theatre in Ukraine (Мінняйло [Minyailo]). His main idea was to enable veterans and volunteers to stage Shakespeare’s plays in English. The premiere of *Twelfth Night* at the Globe Theatre in London in 2012 inspired Kasyan to come up with the idea of a theatre with war veterans. He approached Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi, who became the artistic director of the Veteran Theatre, with his initiative. A casting call was held with the main criteria being a basic knowledge of English and no acting experience.

The director of the Frankivsk Drama Theatre, the actor Oleksii Hnatkovskiy, worked on *Twelfth Night* with 14 veterans and volunteers, who made the casting. The idea of staging the play in English seemed highly ambitious, if not insane, as most of the participants had no experience of public recitation. The decision turned out to be a good one, however, and project ‘W’ brought together people from different parts of Ukraine who were looking for a way to recover through art. The play was staged for the first time in 2019 in Kyiv and captivated the audience with its sincerity, confessional character, melancholy, and stormy life-affirmation; the participants received standing ovations in many cities in Ukraine. It is of particular interest that the play was also performed in the city of Mariupol on 14 August 2021 at the Centre for Contemporary Art as part of the iStage 2021 Festival. As Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi explains: “There are times when you don’t fully understand why you do them, or rather, things you can’t help but do. And this project falls into that category” (Українське радіо [Ukrainian Radio]). The play premiered on 30 June 2019. According to the participants themselves, the theatre had become a place for them to be real, without masks or illusions. According to the project’s initiators, veteran theatre is an opportunity to use art therapy to relax and be distracted from problems and difficult memories, as well as to learn or improve English. Kasyan describes the philosophy as follows: “Rehabilitation through art, particularly performing in the theatre, may not be suitable for everyone. It is more of a way of unwinding and learning something new, as well as of overcoming

certain complexes” (#10 Ігор Касьян [#10 Kasyan, Ihor]). They were also united by certain shared values: a belief in personal development, respect for defenders, and love for Ukraine.

When attending the performance, it is immediately apparent that the audience is watching amateur actors. The participants appear on stage dressed in parts of their military uniforms. They are wearing chevrons, khaki T-shirts, and boots worn by real soldiers and volunteers who have been involved in the first wave of the Russian-Ukrainian war since 2014. The small auditorium of the chamber stage of the theatre made it possible to see close up their tense cheekbones, clenched hands, and even hear someone’s voice breaking. Quickly, however, the actors transformed from veterans into Shakespearean characters. Mariia Krutoholova, the costume designer, successfully integrated elements of Shakespearean costumes, combining them with elements of military clothing.

In addition to directing, Oleksii Hnatkovskyi was responsible for the project’s musical score and the stage design. The songs used in the play, especially *Auld Lang Syne*, were integrated into the stage action, creating an atmosphere of uplifting and emotional cleansing, reminding us of hope, community and the power of art to heal the soul. The audience, which came expecting sadness, found a play that was full of joyful emotions, and the actors, although unprofessional, impressed with their confidence, ability to improvise and interact with the audience, filling the well-known texts with new emotions and experiences.

The production was a manifesto of sincerity, and also about the victory of the spirit, victory over fear and the victory of love. In it, the stage has become a place for the veteran actors to recover, express themselves and undergo emotional therapy. Shakespeare’s comedy has become a way to comprehend their personal experiences, find ways to resolve internal conflicts through play, interact with other actors and open up a dialogue with the audience. According to Arseniy Prilipka, one of the war veterans and participants: “Theatre helps you adapt and feel that you are not alone. You are among your own, you have shared themes, a common interest, a shared goal that you are moving toward” (Українське радіо [Ukrainian Radio]). This initiative utilized a range of art-therapeutic techniques designed to create a supportive and engaging environment for the participants. The project provided veterans with a unique opportunity to relax, detach from problems and traumatic memories, and simultaneously engage in skill-building activities such as improving their English language proficiency.

Twelfth Night became not only a theatrical performance, but also an important socio-cultural phenomenon. After one of the Veteran theatre performances at the Les Kurbas National Centre for Theatre Arts in Kyiv, the director Oles Sanin told Hnatkovskyi: “You worked for them, for their rehabilitation, to help them, and now they go on stage and provide rehabilitation for us, the audience, for society” (Базів [Baziv]). The project attracted the attention of a wide audience and received support

from the Ministry of Veterans Affairs. The results of the project are impressive: the theatre already has four Shakespeare plays in its repertoire, successful tours and numerous positive reviews from critics and audiences. *Twelfth Night* was one of the two production which received the best experimental and exploratory performance of year award at the HRA All-Ukrainian Theatre Festival-Premium in 2021. Project 'W' has demonstrated that not only can theatre be an art form, but also a powerful tool for social adaptation, rehabilitation and recovery.

The repertoire of Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre in the city of Ivano-Frankivsk now includes four Shakespeare plays, successful tours, and numerous positive reviews from critics and audiences. Although the theatre is located in a mid-size city and seems an unlikely candidate for groundbreaking, innovative Shakespearian theatre, the Ukrainian-Russian war, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the influx of internally displaced people from the east of the country have become impetuses for its team to spark creative and innovative projects in the area of Shakespearian performance. The plays staged by the Ivan Franko Theatre have not only provided entertainment and aesthetic pleasure to audiences both at home and abroad, but have also fulfilled a cathartic role for viewers, particularly those housed temporarily in the basement/bomb-shelter and for the actors themselves, most significantly the war veterans involved in the staging of *Twelfth Night*. While the stage for their *Hamlet* production is literally a shelter from the storm, the overall mission of both productions has been to provide a creative and artistic shelter from the horrors and ravages of war.

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