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War-torn *King Lear*: Adaptation as Catharsis

Abstract

Ukrainian director Vyacheslav Yehorov staged *King Lear* around war-torn Ukraine, and then in 2024 toured this Ukrainian *King Lear* to Stratford-upon-Avon (Royal Shakespeare Company; see Christie Carson's article in this volume). Yehorov and Dmytro Hreshko collaborated in producing a film documenting the challenges and experiences of staging *King Lear* in such a context: *'King Lear': How We Looked for Love during the War*. This paper examines the significance of *King Lear* as a refuge for Ukrainian communities grappling with the ravages of war, and explores how Yehorov and Hreshko's adaptation serves as a source of catharsis. At the heart of *King Lear* lies the theme of seeking shelter, a resonant motif for communities impacted by war. The characters' struggles for refuge mirror the plight of Ukrainian refugees displaced from their homes. The parallels extend further as Lear's fragmented Britain symbolically reflects the fractured state of Ukraine, pervaded by loss and destitution. The paper traces Lear's evolution from an isolated victim to a figure who discovers solace in human connections, mirroring

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the journey of many Ukrainians enduring hardship, as it is depicted in the film. By examining testimonies from the ad-hoc Ukrainian actors involved in Hreshko and Yehorov's film alongside Lear's development, the study seeks to shed light on how *King Lear* acquires healing powers for communities in distress, offering a portrayal of collective destitution and emphasizing the importance of solidarity, empathy, and love in adversity. Ultimately, Yehorov and Hreshko's initiative is interpreted as a form of *bibliotherapy* on stage, harnessing the therapeutic potential of theatre to provide solace during tumultuous times. Through their adaptation of *King Lear*, the two Ukrainian artists offer Ukrainian audiences a narrative that reflects their experiences and fosters a sense of communal resilience, showcasing the enduring power of Shakespeare's plays to heal and unite even in the darkest of times.

Keywords: adaptation, bibliotherapy, catharsis, *King Lear*, Ukraine.

Introduction

The present article undertakes an analysis of Vyacheslav Yehorov and Dmytro Hreshko's documentary, *'King Lear': How We Looked for Love during the War (KLDoc)*, against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The film presents viewers with a poignant portrayal of how Ukrainian refugees affected by war and displacement come together in the town of Uzhhorod to stage a highly personalised adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The film intertwines scenes of the everyday life of the refugees in Uzhhorod with shots from the performance of *King Lear* itself. The documentary offers viewers insights into the creative and administrative process by which the Ukrainian director Vyacheslav Yehorov formed an impromptu acting company, comprised entirely of refugees who had fled to the city of Uzhhorod for shelter. The participants in this project collaborated to produce a highly personalised rendition of *King Lear*, deeply intertwined with the actors' own experiences of war and displacement. The current article proposes an examination of the therapeutic role of Shakespeare's *King Lear* for Ukrainians affected by the war, as it transpires from this film material. In addition, it seeks to explore how the documentary portrays the play as a reflection on and extension of the actors' tumultuous lives in the context of war. The documentary combines behind-the-scenes moments with adaptations of key passages from Shakespeare's play, thus blurring the boundaries between Ukrainians' concrete experience of the reality of war and the themes of suffering, exile and loss prevalent in Shakespeare's tragedy. To further explore the therapeutic value of such a dramatic exercise, the article will relate the *mise en scène* of key moments in *King Lear* as shown in the documentary to the testimonies of the actors taking part in this project, in order to showcase the play as an example of bibliotherapy for a community in distress.

The aim of the article is to show how the filmic adaptation (documentary) of *King Lear* does not only chronicle the staging of the play but also serves as an in-depth exploration of how performative arts can become a tool for processing collective trauma. Drawing on trauma theory, the analysis will investigate the ways in which the refugee-actors engage with Shakespeare's play as a means of coming to terms with their own displacement and emotional trauma. In addition, this article will make use of the Aristotelian concept of catharsis (10) to emphasize the ways in which the refugees' identification with the characters they play enables them to articulate their traumas and fears in the context of the Russian full-scale invasion and to find solace in a collective artistic endeavour. Through parallels between the play and the Ukrainians' collective plight, and through a discussion of the directorial options seen in the performance shots provided by the documentary, this article will explore the role of performance as a therapeutic tool, but also as a way to re-assert the collective identity of a community in times of uncertainty.

Yehorov's *King Lear*: Therapy through Reading and Performance

The emotional appeal of *King Lear* as a tale of suffering and redemption has been noted repeatedly. Irving Ribner is of the opinion that *King Lear* revolves around "the process of human regeneration", a "spiritual rebirth for which man never can grow too old" (34). Likewise, Arthur Kirsch points out that Shakespeare's plays, particularly *King Lear*, present a strong force of interpellation: "Shakespeare's tragedies are, above all else, plays of passions and suffering that we eventually recognize as our own, whatever their social, political, or religious contingencies may have been in the Renaissance" (154). It is this very force of interpellation, an invitation for readers, audiences and actors alike to step into what Kirsch called the characters' "emotional landscape" (154), which gives the play its universal appeal. Thus, it is not surprising that such a play was chosen to embody the experience of being uprooted and seeking solace in the midst of a full-scale military conflict. However, Yehorov and Hreshko do not merely adapt *King Lear* on stage. They go further in relating their adaptation to the daily lives of the actors working towards this project. Hence, performance itself is integrated into a documentary following the daily lives of the refugees in Uzhhorod. In what follows, the present article will argue that it is precisely the realist bent afforded by the documentary format which gives rise to the idea that staging and acting in *King Lear* is an act of bibliotherapy – the use of reading for therapeutic purposes (Miller 17) or, more specifically, of dramatherapy – therapy through theatre (Landy 104).

However, before delving into the therapeutic implications of the play, it would be useful to establish how the theoretical framework offered by trauma studies illuminates the status of the refugees' *King Lear* as an externalization of the actors'

own personal and collective turmoil. Cathy Caruth, a pioneer of trauma studies, defines trauma (in a psychoanalytical key) as “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). In Caruth’s words:

[T]rauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available (4).

From Caruth’s perspective, literature is the one medium which enables people to express otherwise inexpressible trauma, since it “is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (3). According to Caruth, literature helps convey “the story of trauma” (7), not in an escapist manner, but in a way which enables the subject to recognise and share the traumatic experience. Commenting on Caruth’s theoretical framework for understanding trauma, Joshua Pederson makes the point that her correlation between trauma and literature is based primarily on “the testimonial power of literature” (334). In performing arts, the sharing and reworking of trauma through literature that Caruth talks about (7) can be most strongly associated with the Aristotelian concept of catharsis:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the *purification* of such emotions (10, my emphasis).

For Aristotle, theatre, and particularly tragedy, elicits in the spectator a sort of psychological *catharsis* (10), born out of the confrontation with “pity and fear” (10) – in other words, a reflection on the trauma of another. In similar terms, the actor playing a tragic character is purified by the act and becomes more conscious of their own emotions during performance. Drawing on Aristotle, Michael M. Chemers and Mike Sell couple catharsis with the therapeutic potential of theatre, which fosters “profound emotional engagement” in actors and audiences alike, along with an increased “capacity for empathy and compassion” (53). Thus, when correlated with Caruth’s trauma theory (7), it becomes apparent that catharsis, as understood by Aristotle is a purification of trauma through confrontation, a confrontation between the actors’ personal trauma and the trauma of the characters portrayed on stage. In Sue Jennings’ view, the “embodiment of the character and scenario [...] allows both an inner expansion of experience and an inner clarification of perception” (5). This theoretical framework sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how these concepts are made manifest in the documentary-adaptation of *King Lear*.

The documentary begins with the actors sharing their reactions to the start of the Russian invasion in 2022. They briefly reminisce about how they learned

about the war, and how they came to Uzhhorod. Their accounts are doubled by shots of ruined buildings in Uzhhorod as a result of the Russian bombings, and this association between verbal testimonies and the visual consequences of war institutes a profound sense of loss. Such shots of the city in ruins are paralleled with a scene from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, presumably an addition by the director and writer, in which Lear's Fool asks: "My King! And where is the King?" (*KLDoc* 00:04:42-00:05:10).¹ Often, the documentary joins together the scenes from the play with the testimonials of the actors playing these scenes. Hence, there is a clear connection between theatre and its real-life context. Yehorov himself commented on the process:

I felt that these people were already actors [...] since they are already in a real tragedy, in the conditions of war, and they will be able to convey the feeling of what is happening better than actors. Because actors would need to act, but unfortunately, people don't need to play a tragedy, [be]cause it is happening before our eyes. (*KLDoc* 00:05:28-00:06:15)

What the screenplay writer is indirectly hinting at is a combination between bibliotherapy and dramatherapy. By alternating scenes from *King Lear* with the actors' own experiences of war, the documentary shows that the staging of *King Lear* should be considered an instance of bibliotherapy. According to Jesse Miller, bibliotherapy entails an "intentional use of reading for the promotion of mental and emotional health" (17). In Miller's view, bibliotherapy is based on the ways in which literature can "challenge, disrupt and disturb one's sense of self" (18). Although the artistic exercise under analysis is not a self-proclaimed "bibliotherapy session" by any means, many actors depicted in the documentary confessed that producing *King Lear* in Uzhhorod gave them a sense of consolation (*KLDoc* 01:20:30-39) and an example of resilience, particularly found in the character of Cordelia (*KLDoc* 01:19:57).

The documentary frequently shows its actors trying to make sense of the play, discussing it during auditions and the rehearsals of several scenes. Each of the actors tries to make sense of their own life by appealing to the play, while also interpreting *King Lear* through the lens of their own experiences. During the auditions section of the documentary, Yehorov encourages everyone who wishes to contribute to the staging of *King Lear* to share their individual story. In the screenplay writer's view, "[w]hat these people and *King Lear* have in common is a lack of love" (*KLDoc* 00:11:20-32), adding that working towards a production

¹ For reasons of clarity and consistency, this article makes use of the English subtitles provided by the platform *Taxflix.com*, where the film is available at https://takflix.com/en/films/kinglear?check_logged_in=1. Accessed 29 August 2025.

of *King Lear* would stand testament to the fact that, in spite of their sufferings, the actors “have not lost their humanity” (*KLDoc* 00:11:38). Many of the actors talk about their relatives on the frontline, about losing one’s parents, or about missing home. “Should we not cry?” (*KLDoc* 00:18:40–44), Yehorov asks one of the prospective female actors, who reminisces about the relatives she has been separated from as a result of the war. This, according to Yehorov, is the primary aim of this theatrical project: to offer an emotional release to those inevitably affected by war (*KLDoc* 00:18:41). Partly as a result of the confessional nature of this documentary, there is a clear self-identification between the actors and the characters they play, a connection between their own experiences as war refugees and the experiences they portray on stage (abandonment, banishment, death). This brings Yehorov’s project closer to what in recent studies of psychotherapy has been termed dramatherapy. Robert Landy points out that, at the core of dramatherapy is the idea that people engaging in such a therapeutic exercise, whether clinical or not, “enter into an ‘as if?’ context where [they are] both who [they are] and who [they are] not. In other words, in dramatherapy, transference is overt” (104). Thus, actors take part in a transformative experience, a confrontation between the real-life self and a fictionalised, dramatized version of the self which arises from the encounter with Shakespeare’s play. By coupling scenes from the play with the actors’ musings about the impact of the war, their hopes, dreams and fears, the documentary format aids in bringing together the enmeshed identities of the actors who, after all, act “for real”, to borrow a phrase used by Adam Blatner with reference to dramatherapy (ix).

***King Lear*: Exile, Refuge and the Problem of Escapism**

The Uzhhorod *King Lear* makes use of the play’s themes of exile and suffering, deepening certain motifs in order to better express the complex reality of being a refugee in a war-torn country. Jane Elizabeth Kingsley-Smith has read *King Lear* as a play of generalized banishment and “schism” (203). In spite of the grim resonances of such concepts as banishment or division, which are at the heart of the play, Kingsley-Smith sees banishment in the play as a dual experience: at once a “cruel disjoining” and a “playful refashioning” (204), a pessimistic tale of suffering which nonetheless presents the hope of self-renewal. In many ways, the *King Lear* put together by the Ukrainian refugee-actors exploits this inherent duality of the status of the exile, which becomes a deeply personal mode of thinking for the actors involved. The experience of fleeing the war, of parting with friends and families, as many of the actors confess, stresses the alienation inherent in the exile status, which is likened, in the documentary, to the alienation faced by the banished characters in the play. However, the very act of putting together a play

as non-professional actors gives the participants a sense of belonging to a greater purpose (*KLDoc* 00:37:00). This can be assimilated to the creative potential presupposed by the experience of banishment, which parallels the banished characters' own attempt to create themselves anew in *King Lear* (Kingsley-Smith 204).

In his *King Lear*, Yehorov generally follows the original structure of the play, while adapting some scenes to better fit the experiences of his community. The personal touch resides in the addition of a prologue (*KLDoc* 00:07:03) intended to preface the action of the play and relate it to the actors' experience of displacement. In the Prologue, the director imagines the evacuation train (prefigured by actors dressed in white) arriving at Uzhhorod train station. As such, the play itself is imagined as a displaced entity, and only after reaching the relative safety of Uzhhorod can the actors "escape" into the world of the play. The place of shelter, Uzhhorod, is thus directly associated with the possibility of performance, and the play itself becomes a safe space for the actors displaced by war. In a behind-the-scenes moment, one of the actors commented that the arrival in Uzhhorod and the staging of *King Lear* were akin to "escaping from hell" (*KLDoc* 00:13:40–49). However, the extent to which the play is prefigured by the creators as an escape from the realities of war is questionable, because the directorial options suggest, as far as setting is concerned, a much more complex amalgamation of different realities. Yehorov and Hreshko have opted for a fairy-tale-like setting for the play, as if the action were unfolding in a forest-like mythical realm. Even the character of the Fool is stylized to resemble a skeleton with the head of a faun, which is in line with his trickster status. Additionally, Lear's throne is made of planks of wood arranged to give it a natural, asymmetrical appearance. To further the association with pastoral greenery, the king and his daughters wear what appear to be twig crowns, reminiscent of Christ's Crown of Thorns. Such aesthetic options are in line with critical opinions that consider *King Lear* a tragedy of biblical dimensions, portraying a type of paradoxical "creation defined by separation" and chaos (Storozynsky 163).

There is a strong impression that the events are unfolding in a Shakespearean romance-like "other" realm, at least in the very beginning of the performance. The arrangement of Lear's "throne room" takes inspiration from the natural world, as wood dominates the stage design and becomes part of Lear's *regalia*, a complex symbol of strength, but also of decay and regeneration. In this respect, there is an indication, in Yehorov's adaptation, of a mingling between the civilised world represented by Lear's court and what Northrop Frye called "the green world" (182). Frye associates the terms with Shakespeare's comedies rather than his tragedies, and indeed the inclusion of the natural world into Lear's court proves to be only an illusory suggestion of the potential romance. Instead, the presence of natural elements, particularly in the first scenes representing the division of the kingdom, constructs only the false hope of a romance, as the play turns out to be, in Maynard Mack's words, an "anti-pastoral" tragedy (65). This generic ambiguity

can be applied to the entire adaptation under discussion. Thus, even if Yehorov and his company of actors envisioned the setting as an extension of the natural world, which, in a typical pastoral, would represent an escape, the aim of their project is not ultimately escapist. This production of *King Lear* starts at the train station, where the actors arrive on the Uzhhorod evacuation train, thus repeating the original scene of their own dispossession and uprootedness. They dress up and assume their roles on the temporary stage/platform, so to speak, and there is no forgetting: the play itself is not an escape from the reality of being a refugee. Instead, as one of the participants explains in the documentary, the play helps him make sense of his own situation, of “living today” (*KLDoc* 00:16:30).

The therapeutic dimension of staging the play comes less from the sense of release such a project affords, and more from the confrontation with one’s own trauma, that is externalised on stage and can thus be more readily expressed, as Caruth suggests (7). For example, in a short testimonial during the documentary, the actor playing King Lear expressed disappointment over the director’s choice not to change the ending of the play into a happy one, stating: “If I were the author, Shakespeare, I’d let Cordelia live” (*KLDoc* 01:19:40). However, the actor acknowledges that the character’s tragic death makes her into a more powerful model of resilience. An escapist project would have probably altered the ending for a more optimistic denouement. Such a directorial option, as Arlen Collier points out with reference to romance-like re-writings of *King Lear*, would have restored the “archetypal pattern” of death and renewal through “poetic justice” (1976: 53). Nonetheless, a return to an imagined state of calm would have probably diminished the therapeutic effect of the play, as it would not have enabled the actors to filter their own tragic reality through the finality of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. To a certain extent, as the lead actor suggests, a happy ending would have conferred on the actors and audiences a futile sense of “distraction” (*KLDoc* 01:21:09). Such a distraction, however, would have taken away the cathartic factor of the bibliotherapeutic journey, since it is only tragedy that can give rise to purification, as the Aristotelian *Poetics* puts it (10).

The appeal of preserving the original tragic narrative in the documentary itself rather than creating a compensatory romance-like adaptation stems also from the documentary format. The film blends the otherworldly atmosphere of the play with the highly realistic depictions of the ruins of Uzhhorod. In a testimonial segment (*KLDoc* 00:25:21–00:28:32), several of the actors/residents of Uzhhorod talk about the uncertainty of ever returning home, and about their perceived self-image as exiles. Such testimonies are prefaced by the storm scene in the play, where the essentially banished Lear chides the elements:

Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!
You cataracts and hurricanes, spout

Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks.
 You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world. (*King Lear* 3.2.1–7)

In this scene, the sound of thunder and the effusion of lightning muffle Lear's speech – it is a scene where both the spectator and the actor playing Lear are clearly overstimulated. Unlike in the original play, however, the Fool stands beside Lear in confusion, unable to make sense of his rage – the alterity which makes sense of Lear's world is silent. Later in the documentary, one of the female actors playing Cordelia presents viewers with the rundown Chuhuyiv House of Culture, destroyed by bombings, and she clearly associates the destitution of the place with the storm scene. She explains that the building had served as a cultural centre in peacetime, and had later been turned into a shelter, but it was eventually destroyed, looking just like the storm scene, “gloom and despair everywhere”, as the female actor suggested, with a laugh (*KLDoc* 01:07:57–01:08:10). Thus, the refugees of Uzhhorod clearly recognise their own predicament in Lear's downfall, and they associate the uncontrollable force of nature in the play with the unpredictability of warfare. As this clip shows, the actors working on *King Lear* are inclined to relate Lear's deep feelings of alienation and helplessness, associating them with the concrete realities of war. Such a strategy helps them create a sense of distance from their own trauma, which enables them to even look at it humorously, in the sense of dark humour. The same female actor links this coping mechanism to the Fool's characteristic way of “joking tragically”, as she puts it at the beginning of the documentary (*KLDoc* 0:10:32). Thus, producing *King Lear* enables the refugee-actors to look their own trauma in the face, and be purified of the psychological load of war, while recognising a likeness between themselves and Lear.

Staging War and Solidarity

According to Gary Taylor, the war in *King Lear* is an integral part of the play's plot (27). Nevertheless, like many of Shakespeare's battles, the final moment of climactic violence is relegated to the off-stage, which turns it into an almost “anti-climactic” moment (27). With reference to the final battle of the play, Taylor stresses the fact that “the playwright presents us, as the world presents his characters, with a ‘fait accompli’” (27). As far as the portrayal of war is concerned, things are wholly different in the adaptation under discussion. As Yehorov states at the beginning of the documentary, “*King Lear* is also about war and relationships and people” (*KLDoc* 00:09:56–00:10:32). In this way, the Ukrainian refugees' adaptation and

treatment of the matter of war can be understood as the resurgence of a traumatic event in Cathy Caruth's interpretation:

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance returns to haunt the survivor later on. (4)

This "haunt[ing]" (4) experienced by the survivors of war is, however, directed through a more positive outlet by dramatizing symbolic versions of the concrete traumatic events in a controlled environment. Moreover, changes in the depiction of war in the play lead to a more politicized and actualized version of *King Lear*, one which directly reflects on the reality faced by many Ukrainians.

In Yehorov and Hreshko's adaptation, the division of the kingdom is creatively rendered by having the Fool act as Lear's map of Britain. This potentiates the absurdity presupposed by such a division, since the "cutting up" of the country metaphorically figures the physical disjoining of the Fool. The absurdity of territorial division, of Lear's "darker purpose" (*King Lear* 1.1.35), which serves as an allusion to the absurdity and moral darkness of the Russian invasion, goes further, in associating the representation of the country with the human body. This is essentially a rendering of the Renaissance idea of the body politic, the transcendental and collective counterpart of the king's "body natural" (Kantorowicz 7). However, in the adaptation at hand, the body politic is not the King's, but the Fool's, as he is Lear's sane counterpart. This division anticipates the division presupposed later on by the civil war instituted by Lear's two daughters. The identification of the Fool with the map also provides a degree of comic relief, since the Fool reacts mockingly to the effusions of love and flattery presented by Lear's eldest daughters. By allowing audiences to encounter the Fool right from the beginning, and to associate his body with the body of the country, the adaptation offers a way for the actors and the audience to make sense of disjunction and displacement in lighter terms, through comic understatement. This is in line with the use of humorous reading material in bibliotherapy. The dramatic encounter of humour in a collective dramatic project, even in a tragicomic scene such as this one, is "more than a tool for survival [...] it becomes an act of redemption" in bibliotherapy (Barreca, qtd. in Sturm 175).

Later on in the play, the scenes related to civil war have a powerful resonance in the documentary. In a behind-the-scenes moment, the actors talk about friends and family members who have been drafted, while they themselves live in the relative safety of Uzhhorod. Following these testimonies, Cordelia is shown moments before reuniting with her father, just after the Messenger informs her of the impending attack of "the British powers" (*King Lear* 4.4.21). Cordelia then delivers a speech on the complexity of such a war, in which she is forced to fight against her own siblings in order to protect her father:

O dear father.

It is thy business that I go about;

Therefore great France

My mourning and important tears hath pitied.

No blown ambition doth our arms incite.

But *love, dear love* (*King Lear* 4.4.23–27, my emphasis).

It is notable that the documentary's subtitle, *How We Looked for Love During the War*, may be read as an indirect reference to the lines emphasized in the above passage. In conjunction with the actors' discussions about the war, about the duty to protect their country, this becomes a significant disclaimer for the creators of the documentary. Far from glorifying violence or a misplaced sense of patriotism, Yehorov points out that the primary drive behind this project is to compensate for a profound feeling of deprivation, what he calls a "lack of love" (*KLDoc* 00:11:32), a suggestion directly related to a sneak peek of this scene. Through Cordelia's wish to restore her father as the rightful monarch of Britain, the Ukrainian directors express a nuanced justification of their countrymen's view of the war, which is not read as "ambition" (*King Lear* 4.4.26), but as a layered expression of one's duty towards one's community. The suggestive power of such a dramatic moment, in the context of discussions about the impact of war among actors off-stage, offers a model of action which promotes fortitude and humility. This enables actors and audiences to reinterpret the ethical complexities of war and to shift the power dynamics from the oppressor to the oppressed by identifying with the moral model presented by Cordelia.

In the documentary, a key moment in the depiction of war is reimagining the confrontation between Lear, Cordelia and the enemy powers of Goneril and Regan. Before offering a glimpse of this final confrontation, the documentary shows the residents of Uzhhorod running to find shelter at the sound of the sirens, explaining that such evacuation signals have become a common occurrence for people living in Ukraine. After this explanation, the documentary shifts its attention to the final battle in *King Lear*. The play's final conflict is rendered into an evocative metaphor for the ongoing war in Ukraine. As noted previously, the director chose to fully represent this episode, going against Shakespeare's "anti-climactic" treatment of the final battle (Taylor 27). As the enemy armies approach each other, there is a deafening siren-like sound and the whole stage is filled with infrared lighting, mirroring the sensory experiences of many Ukrainians who sought shelter during bombardments. In this way, the trauma of war "haunts" (Caruth 4) the victims, and the acts of violence inherent in a military confrontation are symbolically rendered through an appeal to the Ukrainians' sensory experience of the war. This enables the actors to transfer their experiences onto the characters they play, going beyond "the reality of the violent event" (Caruth 6) of war and

gaining the possibility to meditate on previously unknown reactions to the stimulus of trauma, to forge a link between “narrative and reality” (Caruth 6). This correlation is meant to reshape the understanding of their own experiences and thus provide a sense of clarity, and even of freedom (Caruth 26).

There is also an indication, in the documentary, of the actors’ self-identification with the discarded heroes of the play, which is understood as a re-writing of the Ukrainians’ own fate and as a means of expressing solidarity with their countrymen on the frontline. Behind the scenes, as the actors are preparing their armour for the battle scene, they reminisce about their friends who were drafted at the beginning of the war. As their memories of loved ones come into focus, the documentary offers a glimpse into the single combat between Edgar and Edmund: “This sword, this arm and my best spirits are bent / To prove upon thy heart, whereto I speak. / Thou liest” (*King Lear* 5.3.137–139). The documentary pays particular attention to the misunderstood honesty of such characters as Edgar and Cordelia. Already at the beginning of the documentary, one female actor implies that the purpose of the performance is to present viewers with an authentic picture of the Ukrainians as war victims fighting for the rehabilitation of the truth: this goes beyond ideological constructs or propaganda (*KLDoc* 00:03:30). Shakespeare provides the actors with a sympathetic model of collective identity, particularly in the heroic characters of Edgar and Cordelia and, to a certain extent, in the person of the enlightened Lear reuniting with his banished daughter. The last moments of the performance can be discussed as a case of “transference” occurring in the act of performance, as outlined by Landy (104), which enables actors, audiences, but also possibly readers of the play to refashion themselves in times of acute distress and to come to a deeper understanding of their self-image and of their community. Such a therapeutic function of the play builds a sense of togetherness in adversity, of solidarity in the face of war, and presents Ukrainians with models of integrity in times of tragedy, which they explicitly adopt.

Conclusion

The final moments of the documentary are marked by an epilogue, where the actors urge the audience to preserve peace and keep hope (*KLDoc* 01:22:49–01:25:15). Thus, interpellation of the other (“the other” understood both as the spectator of the play in Uzhhorod and as the viewer of the documentary) is paramount. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is a vehicle for making this interpellation possible. Through the documentary, Yehorov and Hreshko extend the sense of solidarity beyond their tightly knit community and champion the universality of human resilience in the face of tragedy, as expressed by Shakespeare. The shared experience of staging the play, along with the collective adoption of the Shakespearean tragic

hero as a moral model, provides a sense of solace for war victims in distress, while also legitimising the defence and upholding of their core values of integrity and solidarity. What is significant is the fact that Yehorov and Hreshko's documentary in itself has some therapeutic potential and can be read as an instance of bibliotherapy and dramatherapy. The refugees-turned-actors meditate on their war experience and fashion an alternative narrative to express their hardships in a dramatized format. The making of the film allowed them the space and time for reflection and introspection. The Ukrainian refugee-actors' identification with the Shakespearean characters and the use of the play for therapeutic purposes is made apparent by looking at their staging of *King Lear* and at the documentary itself through the lens of trauma studies. As this article has argued, "transferring" war trauma onto the stage, while engaging creatively with the representations of war and chaos provided by Shakespeare, brings about a controlled encounter with one's own traumatic experience through a collective re-interpretation of the war narrative, and reasserts the value of Shakespearean tragedy as a fulcrum in the face of loss. Ultimately, the documentary shows how Shakespeare's universal tale of suffering and of the pursuit of love can be skilfully adapted and actualised so as to express the collective creed that the human spirit is able to find refuge in art and in the encounter with the Other, which art facilitates.

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