



**Cristie Carson\***

# Theatre Studio of IDP's Uzhik Production of *King Lear*, directed by Viacheslav Yehorov, staged at the Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon, on 14 and 15 June 2024

Creative team: Oleksandr Larchenko (Technical Support), Asia Antsyferova (Sound Designer), Yuliia Yehorova (Producer), Veronika Hromadska (Make-Up Artist, Translator and Photographer), Viktoriya Nad (Project Manager), Ahnesa Tsvilodub (Assistant Director) and Hennadii Yeshkunov (Stage Manager).

Cast Members: Olena Aliabieva, Tetiana Holyshevskva, Yuliia Horielkova, Veronika Hromadska, Andrii Khomik, Myroslava Koshtura, Viktoriya Lyulko, Viktoriya Nad, Olena Perekotiienko, Olena Potseluieva, Ahnesa Tsvilodub and Hennadii Yeshkunov.

The 15th of June 2024 was a complex day for me. I had recently returned to England from Romania where I had attended a range of productions at the Craiova International Shakespeare Festival and I was about to fly to Canada to visit my elderly

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parents. I had booked my flight just after this production because the inclusion of a Ukrainian *King Lear* in the inaugural season of the new artistic directors of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), Daniel Evans and Tamara Harvey, seemed a conscious statement of the political intentions of the pair. In the programme they state: “We hope that, whether you speak Ukrainian or not, you will be struck by how *King Lear*’s universal themes of bifurcation and loss draw immediate parallels with the experiences of Ukrainian refugees” (RSC Programme 2025).

This engagement with the world outside of the theatre marked a significant departure from the former Artistic Director Gregory Doran, who rarely took political risks in his programming or direction. My expectation was that given my familiarity with ‘global Shakespeare’, with the theatre space (The Other Place) and the hosting theatre company (RSC), not to mention the play, I would have access to the key elements of this theatrical event. But the production of *King Lear* I witnessed was markedly different from other stagings of this tragedy that I have seen in Stratford-upon-Avon or elsewhere.

The production’s opening scene made clear that this was to be a pared-down version of the story, performed by just five actors, all but one of whom was female. This dominance of women on stage reflected the conditions of the company’s town of origin, Uzhorod, which has swollen to quadruple its size since the full-scale conflict began in 2022. It was also born out of the reality of creating a touring theatre with actors who were exempt from combat (a younger actor cast as Lear was denied a visa to travel). When the five actors entered the stage they wore tight beige undergarments, making them look both vulnerable and lost, a far cry from the regal entrance of the King’s court in most productions. Laura King in her *Los Angeles Times* review highlights the opening soundscape: “The sound of a piping flute – a familiar hallmark of Shakespeare productions – gave way to the shriek of train whistles, the thud of pistons, and Ukrainian-language announcements of trains arriving from battered cities across the country”. This presentation of the play was to be a visceral reproduction of the present conditions of war, not an abstract imagining of a long-lost Britain. The actors in this production were themselves displaced people, largely without any experience of acting, many of whom had never read Shakespeare before. As they opened silver trunks to retrieve costume pieces that would denote their characters, a chilling sense of the lives of millions of refugees, who had to flee their homes with only the clothes on their backs, was instantly evoked.

The production’s stage design provided a shifting visual feast. A series of moving frames with lengths of white fabric, which King likens to shrouds, were moved about the stage by the actors to denote scene changes. Intense lighting and an ongoing score that blended Ukrainian traditional and contemporary elements, worked to create a versatile and haunting series of scenes. Lear (65-year-old Andrii Khomik) and his daughters wore crowns made of white twigs, which evoked a devastated

land of fragile beauty. The former museum worker, who fled Crimea for western Ukraine in 2014, presented a formidable but frightened king. The minimalist use of props, combined with a clever use of lighting and sound, created shifts in tone and intensity that allowed the focus to remain on the actors' powerful performances. In this all-female court, the competition between the siblings for their father's favour was intense. Goneril (Olena Perekotiienko) and Regan (Ahnesa Tsvilodub) were both fighting for survival. Cordelia (Myroslava Koshtura) appeared naïve and bewildered. In this adaptation Regan poisoned her sister and then killed herself, rather than the other way around. The King was followed throughout by a wry, playful Fool (Olena Aliabieva), whose slightly distant observations of the family feud allowed her to be the last one standing at the end of the play. Along with the audience, the Fool's role was to witness the devastation.

But the event did not end with Shakespeare's ending. The actors all came on stage, along with members of the crew, and asked the audience to consider the power of love in the face of conflict. Director Yehorov states: "For me, the war in Shakespeare, it's on paper and that's one thing, but the tragedy that happened in real life is absolutely different, it's a different level. We need to learn that war is the equivalent of death" (quoted in Khomami). Yet despite this bleak outlook the story of the theatre company inspired not only this production but also a documentary *King Lear: How We Looked for Love During the War*, which premiered at the SEEFest festival in Los Angeles in 2023.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately the final message of the play was, as Yehorov puts it, "without love ... we are nothing" (quoted in King). The audience in attendance was visibly moved and rose as one to provide a standing ovation.

My own experience of the event was coloured by several overlapping factors. First, I was keenly aware of a group of young Ukrainian audience members, who clearly understood the spoken text, which was not translated or made available for an English-speaking audience through surtitles. I knew that internationally displaced people groups across Warwickshire<sup>2</sup> were to be given the opportunity to watch a performance before it was presented to the public, but I did not expect the audience at the performance I attended to be so heavily dominated by native speakers. I was struck by how this language barrier also provided a division of experience. I was confronted by my reliance on the existence of surtitles, a practice which is now widely accepted in international Festivals, that provides the illusion of connection with the spoken text. I realised how comfortable I usually feel in a British theatre, or an international Festival, surrounded by other theatre-goers who know these plays intimately. My impression of this production was of

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<sup>1</sup> See Gabriela Cheaptanaru's article in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> These included Welcome Here, Mosaic Church, Hand in Hand and Association of Ukrainians of Great Britain.

experiencing *King Lear* for the first time, but my lack of experience of the world of the players served to make me feel outside the performance, looking in.

My second realisation was that my understanding of the cultural issues relating to the conflict has been very shallow. The pervasive use of the Russian language in Ukrainian, particularly for the performance of Shakespeare and other cultural work, was news to me. I was confounded by the discovery that Ukrainian productions and translations of Shakespeare had been forbidden in the 1800s. Closer to home, the young Ukrainian friend I had invited to join me for the performance told me for the first time that he did not speak Ukrainian at home, either in Ukraine or in his new British home, despite his strong opposition to the war. He was visibly moved to hear this story in his country's native language, despite (or perhaps because) it was not his language of daily use. The third revelation, which caught me off guard was meeting two esteemed Shakespeare colleagues, who are based in the United States, but who I found have close personal connections with Ukraine. Peter Holland and Romana Huk told me during the play's interval that they had created a course to study the writing coming out of Ukraine in response to the war, which was attended by both American students at the University of Notre Dame and students at the Ukrainian Catholic University.

Yehorov's vision that this play could provide a form of therapy for those involved extended to those in the audience who found in this performance a voice for their pain and displacement, as well as a call for hope through the power of collective action. This *King Lear*, which featured displaced Ukrainians, provided an intensity of performance I have rarely experienced, due to the focus on hope and love as the only way to combat the aggressive Russian offensive. For a group of participants, who say that the war has changed them, and audiences who found the performance altered their perception of the war, this production provided a balm for an international affliction.

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