**Against Empire: Ukrainian Theatrical Resistance, 19th-21st Centuries**

**Dr. Mayhill C. Fowler, Stetson University**

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Thank you so much for inviting me to be a part of this important event. I want to switch gears from a direct discussion of the Holodomor to take a wider lens on Ukrainian culture. I want to tell you a story of the theater in the 19th-21st centuries, centering Ukraine. You might be wondering why, at an event commemorating the Holodomor, we might talk about theater. My answer is simple: because theater matters. Because in a space of empire—and Ukraine existed in a space of empires (Habsburg, Romanov, Soviet)—the stories that people tell matter. And just as people have worked to gain worldwide acknowledgement of the Holodomor, so scholars of culture work to put Ukrainian theater on the map, to show how these stories of theater artists, and the stories they told, can reframe our larger understanding of Eastern European—and Russian—theater. Ukrainian theater has always been of interest only to a niche group, which is because of the geography of power, the ways that empires make sure that the center—Moscow, Vienna—is considered the best, the only, the universal, and the “periphery” is considered secondary, lesser, less worthy of scholarly attention. This “cultural imperialism” is a form of epistemic violence; the Empire diminishes, in some cases disappears, the stories of the people living in its borders. Empires tried to diminish stories in Ukraine, but what we see, across the centuries, in different ways and different forms, is a resistance to empire through telling stories. I’m not arguing that every person I mention was constantly engaged in a battle against empire, no; but I am hoping to show you that artists working in this region did, in ways conscious and perhaps not, push against the Empire, shifting the geography of power. Let me take you on a tour through Ukrainian theater history.

**Maria Zankovetska: Choosing Home, in Empire**

We begin with Maria Zankovetska, a 19th century diva of the Ukrainian stage.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the late 19th century the Russian Empire prohibited the publication and performance of the Ukrainian language. But, to make a long story short, a group of ex-military got together and started doing professional Ukrainian language theater in the 1880s, working around these prohibitions. They had to write an entire repertory, because of a censorship stipulation that European or Russian plays could not appear in Ukrainian translation on the stage. Moreover, censorship stipulated that anything in Ukrainian had to depict only rural life, so they wrote a repertory of plays about rural life. They wrote plays about the failures of emancipation and the struggles in the post-emancipation village. Through their theater we learn a lot of the challenges of the village life in this period: violence class, property, and women losing out each and every time.

As we know, this was the Teatr Koryfeiv, and Maria Zankovetska was its star. These troupes were wildly successful—even performing for the Tsar in St. Petersburg (during a time when they were prohibited from performing in the Kyiv region)—and it was on this trip that Zankovetska posed for the photographer taking photos for the Russian edition of Darwin’s *Expressions of Emotions in Humans and Animals*. She could have stayed in the capital; actually, Imperial state theaters begged her to stay, but she preferred to go home. This group of artists, including Zankovetska, were devoted to place, to Ukrainian lands, and to Ukrainian audiences. They carved out a belonging in—and despite--Empire.

Now, today we might critique this koryfei repertory as a product of censorship, oppression, and inability of Ukrainians to speak, to paraphrase scholar Gayatri Spivak. But despite all that, they did speak, and they created plays that resonated with their audiences. There is no denying that the koryfei were enormously popular. Think of everyday Ukrainians coming from villages to mid-sized towns to see these shows and being able to hear stories in their own language, and stories that—although wildly melodramatic—clearly in some way were “their” stories. I’ll add, of course, that Zankovetska herself resisted the patriarchy to pursue a career when women of her class just did not do that, making choices that were against all the conventions of her time. But the koryfei remain unknown outside Ukraine, or Ukrainian studies.

But what if we put them at the center of our study of 19th century theater? In theater history the 19th c is generally considered the age of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theater, moving into the 20th century with young Meyerhold. If we focus on the koryfei, however, we might see a different picture: the ways military life supported the arts in the wars at the end of the 19th century leading up to World War I, or the ways imperial minorities created new audiences, or the ways theater in empire could be wildly different in different places because of the power of audience demand. Focusing on the koryfei makes Stanislavsky fade, he becomes one story among many of people trying to make a career in the Empire.

**Theater of the Holodomor**

I’ll move forwards now to the 20th century, to the age of Les Kurbas and the Berezil Theater.[[2]](#footnote-2) I’ll discuss here the “theater of the Holodomor”---Mykola Kulish’s play *Maklena Grasa*, in its 1933 production by Kurbas. As you might know, this is the production that was, in a way, the end of the Berezil era…it led to the arrests of Les Kurbas and leading actor Iosyp Hirniak, and therefore a shift in the direction of the theater. But let’s look deeper to find resistance to empire.

As the provinces continued to suffer from grain collection quotas in 1933, Kulish wrote his next play for the Berezil: *Maklena Grasa*. A note in the Polish press about a bankrupt banker who paid a homeless man to kill him so that his family would receive his life insurance inspired the play. Kulish indeed set his play in Poland: Maklena Grasa is a young girl, whose family is starving, and is paid by a banker to shoot him, which she does, and then she runs off to join Communist revolutionaries. So Kulish’s play critiques capitalist and bourgeois Poland where bankers pay starving girls to murder them, and so implicitly praises the Land of the Soviets. However, Kulish inserted a note of ambiguity into the play in the character of a Musician, a disillusioned dreamer, former Communist believer, artist, and revolutionary, now living in a doghouse and often too drunk to pluck out a melody who talks about how the land is cold and barren.

Importantly, *Maklena* was a play written and performed in a time of famine in Soviet Ukraine. It simply could not have been more relevant. As you know, famine in the countryside did not spare the city. Even Politburo documents note high-level political elites claiming illness in order not to have to join countryside grain-collection campaigns. Moreover, food came from villages, and so theaters, like the Berezil, depended on production from the villages to feed their workers.[[3]](#footnote-3) This all-too-relevant context of *Maklena*, needless to say, concerned officials.

One official in charge of managing artists, Andrii Khvylia, wrote a memo to the Soviet Ukrainian Central Committee warning about the play and promising to meet with writer Kulish and director Kurbas. Two days later Khvylia, Kurbas, and Kulish argued in a meeting for five hours until an exacerbated Khvylia finally concluded, “you just cannot take a thirteen year old girl, give her money, then make her kill for this money, and then go to socialism. It’s a crazy thing, and our proletarian society will cry because of it.” In Khvylia’s version he spoke for proletarian society, that is, for the audience. He saw himself as protecting the audience from Kulish and Kurbas—and I think we can assume he was upset by the blatant relevance of a play that would directly, in fact, despite the “Polish” setting, point to what was happening in the countryside.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Despite these reservations, the play opened the Berezil season. Kulish actively followed the subsequent negative eruption in the Kharkiv papers: “I was ready for everything, I hoped for everything, but such a thing, I admit, I did not expect.” The play was gutted by critics---clearly no one wanted such contemporary relevance. When Kulish read about Kurbas’ expulsion from the Berezil a month later, he described his sense of despair: "It's as if I'm losing my physical equilibrium, and as if the ground is shaking under me."[[5]](#footnote-5) What is fascinating here is that the documents show that somehow Kulish did not think the play would be such a colossal, and ultimately tragic, failure. Why?

Actor Iosyp Hirniak's memoirs describe Kurbas and Kulish as truth-tellers testifying to the effects of the famine and crushed by the Party-state complicit in the destruction of Ukrainians in the famine of 1932-1933; for Hirniak the play was written to directly oppose the state and its violent policies. And indeed, at first glance that seems right….but then why do Kulish's letters show such a desire for approval and such shock at the reception?

I think Kulish had a radically different view of theater than Soviet officialdom. Khvylia wanted to protect the audience by hiding the truth from them. Yet Kulish, although a committed Communist, wanted to speak to the audience by telling the truth to them. The play did, of course, tell truth to power, as Hirniak described, but that act of “telling truth” was telling a story that was meaningful to the audience, that spoke to the audience, that reflected the difficult world in which they were living, that brought artists and audience together in a story about the now. In a different world, a play about famine performed in a time of famine could have been cathartic. Watching a character like the Musician disillusioned with Communism could have been important for an audience, in which several members, perhaps, felt disillusioned themselves, or could have challenged audience members to see the revolution in a different light. In short, the play could have sparked debate, could have led to conversations, maybe even changed policy. Kulish believed in the power of theater to be a public sphere, apart from the state, offering a space for the audience to think and dream. Kulish believed in the power of theater to tell the local story—despite what the Empire might order. But that was not Soviet theater, and as you know, both Kulish and Kurbas were shot in November 1937.

**Teatr Lesi: New Money-Muse Relationships**

But this belief of the power of theater to tell true stories remains. I’ll skip forward again to wartime, but pre-February 2022. Another specificity to this place that is today Ukraine is the transformation of cultural infrastructure that was successful in the post-Soviet period. Unlike in Russia, Ukraine seriously cut all funding to the arts after Soviet collapse. Artists had to create new workarounds, co-productions, grants, and new ways of thinking about the audience. In 2015 MP Iryna Podolyak put through a package of legislation that changed the infrastructure, called the “theater laws,” making 5-year positions for artistic directors, getting rid of the previous position of managing director (the admin responsible for party ideology), and making all appointments transparent. There was a lot of discussion and debate about these laws, and we have seen some of the challenges, but these laws truly changed the landscape. They brought a new generation into theater leadership. They brought new faces, many new women, for example, and new funding opportunities, and also, of course, new institutions, such as the Ukrainian Cultural Fund and the Ukrainian Institute, both of which funded and promoted new people and new projects. Decentralization politically also meant decentralization culturally and theaters received more funding from local city councils. This new cultural infrastructure shapes what stories can be told and re-tools the relationship between the money and the muse.

Unlike in Russia where theater has had to rely on between-the-lines and subtext, in Ukraine theater can speak directly. This is the former Soviet army theater in Lviv, now a very cool Ukrainian-language theater called Teatr Lesi with an activist artistic team—largely women, telling stories about Donbas, about the war, about loneliness, about heros, and about ourselves. My city renovates my theater—the banner reads—because the city council (decentralization!) funded renovation of the roof; and it’s “my theater”—not the state’s theater, not the empire’s theater, but the theater of passersby who want to experience stories that resonate with their own lives.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The study of Ukrainian theater has been sidelined in two ways, relegated to the periphery in the study of Russian/Soviet theater as merely a national folk theater or lesser Meyerhold, and sidelined by Eastern Europe or Europe because it is too Soviet. Ukraine itself falls away. But this story of how Ukraine fairly successfully re-tooled the relationship between state, society, and the arts—the money and the muse--is crucial for understanding the rich response in theater to the war today. Ukraine is telling the story of war today. Theaters are active, abroad and in Ukraine. Several collections of new plays have been published, and there are workshops on how to tell the story of war. Students, including ones I teach online in Lviv, are actively thinking about what it means to make theater during war, and are doing projects from Kharkiv to Lviv, even under threat of missiles.

As we think about the long trajectory of Ukrainian theater resisting empire, we can imagine the artists of the past, who created art amid oppression and violence, standing behind the young artists of today. And let’s remember that the Berezil—perhaps the most famous theater of Ukraine—arose after war. Having survived the war, these artists made a new home for telling their stories. May we hope that having survived this war, artists will be making a new Berezil for post-victory Ukraine.

1. In this section, I rely on material from my book *Beau Monde on Empire’s Edge: State and Stage in Soviet Ukraine* (Toronto, 2017; paperback, 2023), esp. Chapter 1; see also Hanna Veselovs’ka, Teatr Mykoly Sadovs’koho (Kyiv: Tempora, 2018); For more on early Soviet theater, and how it is most commonly explained, as centered in Russia and largely ignoring place, see Laurence Senelick, *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History* (New Haven, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This section is taken from my book, Chapter 4, pp. 153-156. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. GARF, f. 5508, op. 1, d. 1922, l. 29-30, 78ob; DMTMKU f. Vasyl'ko, inv. no. 10343, ark 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. TsDAVOV f. 2708, op. 3, s. 740, ark. 83; TsDAHOU f. 1, op. 6, s. 285, ark. 97; note the cartoon of Khvylia in *Chervonyi perets’* 9 (1928), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. O. Borshchahivs'kyi, "5 veresnia vidkryttia sezonu v Berezoli," *Komunist* 22 August 1933, ark. 4; TsDAMLM Kulish, s. 46, s. 47, s. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This section is based on my article “Soviet Ghosts: The Former Theater of the Soviet Army in Lviv and Post-Socialism as a Crisis of Infrastructure,” *Nationalities Papers*, published online March 8, 2022; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.78> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)