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“We Could Have Ventured in the Opposite Direction”

Exploring the Legacy of Polish Theatre on the Festival Map of Independent Ukraine

Abstract

This article examines the representation of Polish theatre on the Ukrainian festival map. This study includes key stages, events, and trends, and aims to uncover both positive developments and underlying problems. The research is based on sources such as published material, information resources, and my experience as a theatre critic. The periods of individual “breakthroughs” (1992–2000), “local encounters” (2001–2011), and “dramaturgical and performative landing forces” (from 2011) are identified and briefly characterized. The article outlines a broad geographical and genre-specific range of festivals in which Polish theatres participate

and highlights their contribution. It also discusses the reception of individual performances by Polish theatres in Ukrainian criticism. The author focuses on the absence of iconic plays of Polish theatre on the posters of Ukrainian festivals (the exception is *Bzik tropikalny* (*The Tropical Craze*) by Witkacy, directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna, 1998). This resulted in the fact that the most important achievements of Polish theatre remained unknown to the Ukrainian audiences, and the professional community gravitated more towards Russia than towards the West. Given the more than four-hundred-year history of Polish–Ukrainian relations, it is essential that steps be taken to restore Polish–Ukrainian theatrical communication in order to ensure that Ukrainian theatre is connected to the European cultural space.

Keywords

Polish–Ukrainian theatre relations, Ukrainian theatre festivals, cultural mobility

Abstrakt

„Mogliśmy pójść w przeciwnym kierunku”: Odkrywanie dziedzictwa polskiego teatru na festiwalowej mapie niepodległej Ukrainy

Artykuł analizuje obecność polskiego teatru na ukraińskiej mapie festiwalowej. Obejmuje kluczowe etapy, wydarzenia i trendy, a jego celem jest odsłonięcie zarówno pozytywnych zmian, jak i podstawowych problemów. Tekst opiera się na opublikowanych materiałach, informacjach festiwalowych i doświadczeniach autorki jako krytyczki. Wyróżniono i krótko scharakteryzowano trzy okresy indywidualnych „sukcesów” (1992–2000), „spotkań lokalnych” (2001–2011) oraz „dramaturgicznych i performatywnych desantów” (od 2011 roku). Artykuł daje obraz lokalnej i gatunkowej różnorodności festiwali, w których uczestniczą polskie teatry, i podkreśla, jak wiele wnoszą w ich programy. Omawia również recepcję poszczególnych spektakli polskich teatrów w ukraińskiej krytyce. Autorka zwraca uwagę na nieobecność ikonicznych spektakli polskiego teatru na afiszach ukraińskich festiwali (wyjątkiem jest *Bzik tropikalny* Witkacego w reżyserii Grzegorza Jarzyny, 1998). To sprawiło, że ukraińska publiczność nie poznała najważniejszych osiągnięć polskiego teatru, a środowisko teatralne ciążyło bardziej ku Rosji niż ku Zachodowi. Biorąc pod uwagę ponad czterystuletnią historię stosunków polsko-ukraińskich, konieczne jest podjęcie kroków w celu przywrócenia polsko-ukraińskiej komunikacji teatralnej, aby zapewnić ukraińskiemu teatrowi połączenie z europejską przestrzenią kulturową.

Słowa kluczowe

polsko-ukraińskie relacje teatralne, ukraińskie festiwale teatralne, mobilność kulturowa

In Ukraine, the theatre festival movement began in the late 1980s and witnessed inevitable democratic changes in society and the arts. Following the independence gained in 1991, it experienced a notable development. The activation of the festival movement testified to the growing agency of Ukraine's theatre, which, along with the state, was beginning to move away from colonial and totalitarian constraints. The country, which was formerly a part of the political, social, and cultural space of the USSR, was given opportunities for direct dialogue with the European community, and theatre festivals became a mechanism for making these connections.

The development of theatrical agency in Ukraine is intricately intertwined with the establishment of Ukraine's agency as a sovereign state. Scholars define this concept as "the ability of a country to independently conceive and implement its own civilizational project, while selecting partners and allies who align with this trajectory."¹ It is crucial to underline that civilizational agency entails the distinct will of the people and its elites to fully assert their country's existence on the global stage.² The authors of the quoted study assert that "without the will for civilizational agency, any theories or laws aimed at fostering agency would be futile."³ These words hold particular significance in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale armed aggression against Ukraine beginning on 24 February 2022, which solidified Ukraine's civilizational choice, granted it a prominent role in the international arena, and forged a circle of allied partners, with Poland being the closest and most influential among them.

Amidst Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a remarkable bond has formed between Ukrainian and Polish theatres, as well as between our nations. The unwavering solidarity and support extended by the Polish people towards Ukrainian society, including our artists, have proven instrumental in our nation's resilience during the initial critical months of the pervasive war. This enduring alliance continues to bolster our collective strength as we persevere in our ongoing battle for victory.

The full-scale war fundamentally altered Ukraine's geopolitical trajectory within the European space. As the conflict escalated, the eastern border with Russia transformed into a volatile frontline, while the western border emerged as a gateway of salvation, offering refuge to millions of Ukrainians. Notably,

¹ Serhii Pyrozhkov and Nazip Khamitov, *Tsyvilizatsiina subieknist Ukrainy: Vid potentsii do novoho svitohliadu i buttia liudyny* (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2020), 14.

² Pyrozhkov and Khamitov, *Tsyvilizatsiina subieknist Ukrainy*, 15.

³ Pyrozhkov and Khamitov, 15.

a substantial number of Ukrainian theatre professionals found solace abroad, particularly in Poland, where they were warmly welcomed. Mariia Yasinska (Марія Ясінська), a theatre scholar and translator, describes this experience of her compatriots as follows:

They saw a different theatre, they had to adapt to other theatre systems. And when they return—and I hope some of them will—it will be a powerful impetus for the development of Ukrainian theatre. Unfortunately, this did not happen before in a natural way, for example, through the festival movement.⁴

Mariia Yasinska, a recipient of the Gaude Polonia scholarship and a former member of the Gogolfest festival team, portrays the state of Ukrainian theatre as being in a catastrophic situation stemming from several factors. These include the limited scope of the Ukrainian post-Soviet theatre landscape, the absence of the meaningful exchange of ideas, and the inability to draw inspiration from, learn from, and engage in a meaningful dialogue with European theatre practices, particularly with our geographically and historically closest neighbor, the Polish theatre.⁵

An inquiry into the development of the civilizational agency of the Ukrainian state (including its theatre) cannot be undertaken independently from another significant matter intertwined with civilizational concerns. This is the concept of a limitrophe state, which denotes being on the threshold of a civilizational transformation. Historians regard this concept as pivotal in comprehending various aspects of Ukraine's independence era.⁶ The limitrophe state is manifested through instability, atomization, internal contradictions, and conflicts in processes at both the general and specific levels. It is these two interrelated and mutually contradictory phenomena—the will to civilizational agency and a limitrophe state as a boundary—that form the basic coordinate system important for understanding the peculiarities of the representation of Polish theatre on the festival map of Ukraine over the past thirty years.

⁴ Maiia Harbuziuk, Interview with Mariia Yasinska, May 15, 2023, audio recording, archives of Maiia Harbuziuk.

⁵ Harbuziuk, Interview with Yasinska.

⁶ Oleksandr M. Maiboroda, ed., *Subiektivist Ukrainy v suchasnomu sviti: Otsinky, stratehii, prohnozy—Analytychna dopovid* (Kyiv: Instytut politychnykh i etnonatsionalnykh doslidzhen im. I.F. Kurasa NAN Ukrainy, 2020), 4, <https://ipiend.gov.ua/en/publication/subject-of-ukraine-in-the-modern-world-assessments-strategies-forecasts-analytical-report/>.

The 1990s: A Breakthrough in Isolation

It is not just due to the fact that Poland shares a border with Ukraine of over 500 km that Polish theatres were an important part of festivals in Ukraine at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. For centuries, Polish theatre served as a powerful conduit for Western art to the East. The freezing of these historical connections in the second half of the twentieth century resulted in the isolation of Ukraine from dialogue with Poland and the European community, leaving it fully subordinated to Soviet totalitarian and colonial domination. During the process of cultural decapsulation and the initiation of an open dialogue with the European cultural milieu, the emergence of the first international theatre festivals held a significant position as fresh platforms for "cultural transfer" (Michel Espagne).⁷ These festivals, often referred to as author's festivals, blossomed as grassroots initiatives driven by visionary leaders who possessed clear goals and innovative concepts, offering an array of culturally enriching programs. Importantly, these festivals unequivocally demonstrated the organizers' unwavering determination to amplify the voice of Ukrainian theatre, catapult it onto the global stage, and restore its rightful place as an equal participant in the European cultural landscape.

One of the first Ukrainian international festivals was named "Berezilla" in honor of the Berezil Theatre, founded by the Ukrainian theatre reformer Les Kurbas (Лесь Курбас) in 1922. Serhii Proskurnia (Сергій Проскурня) (1957–2021), a Ukrainian director and theatre manager, took the initiative, developed the concept, and managed the festival. The first festival took place in Kyiv in 1992 to mark the 70th anniversary of the Berezil Theatre, and the second one in Kharkiv in 1993, where Les Kurbas spent the final years of his theatrical activity in Ukraine.

"Berezillia-93" featured a lecture and training course by representatives of the Grotowski Centre in Wrocław.⁸ Among Ukrainian theatre artists of the time, Jerzy Grotowski was the main figure associated with Polish theatre. The cultural blockade of Ukrainian artists was broken through with the emergence of underground translations of his works by Lviv actors in the 1970s and the opportunity for direct learning from Polish colleagues in 1993. The figure of Grotowski was the key to understanding modern Polish theatre in Ukraine for decades to come. "In my opinion, the connections of the Ukrainian theatre

⁷ Michel Espagne, *Istoriya tsivilizatsiy kak kul'turnyy transfer*, trans. Ekaterina Dmitrieva et al. (Moskva: Novoe lyteraturnoe obozreniye, 2018).

⁸ Olha Stelmashavska, "Ya vybyrayu: Berezil-93", *Ukrainskyi teatr*, no. 4 (1993): 24.

with the Polish theatre in the last decades of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century were marked by Grotowski,” posits the renowned Ukrainian theatre critic and director Iryna Volytska.⁹ The theatre critic Serhii Vasyliiiev (Сергій Васильєв) writes:

Grotowski, at least until the 90s of the twentieth century, was perceived as a pioneer of a new theatrical philosophy throughout the world. Unquestionably, this philosophy played a significant role in the pursuits of a young Ukrainian theatre.¹⁰

During the 1990s, Tadeusz Kantor became the second best-known name on the festival map of Ukraine. During the 1996 Artistic Berezillia festival, a first-time exhibition of Tadeusz Kantor’s drawings was held in Ukraine, after which cooperation with the fund named in his honour was initiated.¹¹ There is a mention of this in almost every professional viewer’s review, collected in a special edition of the *Kino-Teatr* magazine:

In keeping with the first festival’s tradition, Serhii Proskurnia introduces the audience to new theatrical aesthetics—this time Polish director Tadeusz Kantor. An exhibition of sketches, video screenings, and lectures by Lech Stangret (Chairman of the Kantor Foundation) and Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz (Director of the Kantor Research Centre) showcased the history of the twentieth-century theatrical process.¹² From the perspective of impressions, the main event of the festival is Kantor. After all, both his drawings and video recordings are a collision with harsh reality. For me, his art is refreshing. Like a bucket of cold water on the head.¹³

The profound impact of Tadeusz Kantor’s ideas on the artistic endeavors of renowned Ukrainian directors is a subject that merits consideration. While the esteemed director Andrii Zholdak (Андрій Жолдак) honed his craft during his formative years preceding the 1990s, Vlad Troitskyi (Влад Троїцький), the visionary founder of Dakh Theatre (established in 1994) and the artistic director

⁹ Wanda Świątkowska and Hanna Wesełowska, eds., *Polska, Kultura, Ukraina: Wykłady o teatrze/Lektsiiji pro teatr* (Wrocław: Instytut Grotowskiego, 2010), 101–109.

¹⁰ Świątkowska and Wesełowska, *Polska, Kultura, Ukraina*, 101.

¹¹ Nataliia Potushniak, “Mystetske Berezillia,” in *Entsyklopediia Suchasnoi Ukrainy*, ed. Ivan Mykhaailovych Dziuba et al., vol. 20 (Kyiv: Instytut entsyklopedychnykh doslidzhen Natsionalnoi akademii nauk Ukrainy, 2018), online edition, <https://esu.com.ua/article-64677>.

¹² Valentyna Hrytsuk et al., “Maistry suchasnoho ‘Berezillia’: Vrazhennia ‘vid’ ta dumky ‘pro,’” *Kino-Teatr*, no. 5 (1998): 18–19, <https://ekmair.ukma.edu.ua/handle/123456789/7696>.

¹³ Hrytsuk et al., “Maistry suchasnoho,” 18.

of the future Gogolfest festival, delved into Kantor's artistic world in the 1990s, notably through the set of lectures during the Artistic Berezillia festival, as noted by Yasinska.

Unfortunately, the Ukrainian-Polish dialogue within Artistic Berezillia did not extend beyond learning experiences. Even though Serhii Proskurnia, the organizer of Artistic Berezillia, was able to show plays by Romeo Castellucci (1995), Eimuntas Nekrošius (1995), Kama Ginkas (1996), and Roman Viktyuk (1995, 2001) to Ukrainian audiences and bring theatre from Buryatia (2001), the Yantai company of Beijing Opera (1997), ballet from the city of Bordeaux (2000), etc.¹⁴ Artistic Berezillia did not feature any plays by leading Polish directors.

Yaroslav Fedoryshyn (Ярослав Федоришин), the organizer of the Lviv Golden Lion festival, which became increasingly popular and powerful during the 1990s, sought to fill this void. During the second half of the 1990s, the Golden Lion festival began international cooperation, which was a major breakthrough: the international jury was chaired by renowned Polish theatre historian, Shakespeare scholar, and critic Andrzej Żurowski (1944–2013), then vice president of the International Union of Theatre Critics. It was a competitive festival attracting both spectators and critics and enjoying wide mass media coverage. As can be seen in the statistics, the festival developed actively: in 1998, 72 shows were presented, with a significant number of performances by foreign theatre groups.

That year saw one of the most iconic Polish theatre performances: the debut work of the director Grzegorz Jarzyna *Bzik Tropikalny* (*The Tropical Craze*), based on the work by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy) (*Rozmaitości* Theatre, Warsaw). There is no doubt that this performance was a discovery for the Ukrainian audience, not only of a new name but also of a new theatrical language. Undoubtedly, for both the general and the professional audiences in Lviv, encountering this play and discovering the unfamiliar name of the young director marked a significant milestone in the theatrical experience of that period, highlighting the Polish theatre not only as a place of outstanding "living classics," but also of young instigators, as Anna R. Burzyńska once labelled them.¹⁵ In the event that the festival dialogue had been longer and the Ukrainian audience had been able to continue interacting with the works of the new generation of Polish theatre leaders (Krzysztof Warlikowski, Krystian Lupa, Jan Klata, Michał Zadara, Monika Strzępka, Maja Kleczewska, etc.) at the turn of the twenty-first

¹⁴ Potushniak, "Mystetske Berezillia"

¹⁵ Anna Burzyńska, "Polski teatr na porozi xxi stolittia: Klasyky i pidburiuvachi," trans. Mariia Yasinska, *Ukrainskyi teatr*, no. 6 (2013): 48–51.

century, Polish theatre in Ukraine would have been represented differently and its influence on theatre processes would have been greater.

It is noteworthy that there remains almost no trace of information on *The Tropical Craze* in Ukraine. There was a situational silence around this performance in the Ukrainian theatre space. No mention of this event was made even by the authors and compilers of the “Golden Lion-1998” newsletter. It might partially explain why the above-mentioned theatre critic Serhii Vasyliyev confused the plays’ titles and later claimed that he watched Gombrowicz’s *Ivonne, Princess of Burgundy*, directed by Jarzyna. Unfortunately, the Ukrainian authors relied on this information, replicating the regrettable mistake of their colleague.¹⁶ This underlines the problem of the “fading” and “aberration” of the memories on this play’s 1998 presentation in Ukraine.

The first stage of Ukrainians’ encounter with Polish theatre culminated in 2000 with the performance of the play *Déballage* by Józef Szajna as part of the Golden Lion festival. In the professional Ukrainian theatre environment, Józef Szajna was a familiar figure, but his work was a remarkable discovery for a wider audience. Meanwhile, the critical attitude towards Szajna’s work, the feeling of an insurmountable distance from the world he constructed, in the assessment of one of the reviewers, demonstrated the remoteness of contemporary Ukrainian theatre and criticism from understanding the visual language of theatre, irrational narratives, and the discussion of traumas. The following fragment of the review illustrates how alien they were to the author of the critical article:

The consciously formalistic theatre, the theatre of symbols, to which, without a doubt, the performance *Déballage* can be included, has not gained significant popularity in Ukrainian theatre art, and there is not yet a sufficiently prepared culture of understanding such performances. Perhaps this is why the form of the director’s worldview did not strike a chord; the fates of these fictional collective heroes left the audience indifferent, and the deliberateness and challenge of their behavior were simply annoying. We expected the revelations of a master who could convince the viewer, and convert him to his faith, but instead, there was a set of visual-plastic pictures, not connected by a clear directorial decision and obviously far-fetched.¹⁷

¹⁶ Olena Myhashko, “Korotka istoriia tvorchoi rezervatsii,” *Ukrainskyi tyzhden*, July 6, 2019, <https://tyzhden.ua/korotka-istoriia-tvorchoi-rezervatsii/>.

¹⁷ Alla Podluzhnaia, “Vidkryta skrynka Pandory,” *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, November 3, 2000, https://zn.ua/ukr/ART/vidkryta_skrinka_pandori.html.

The given quote represents the majority of Ukrainian criticism, which overwhelmingly focused on "internal theatre product," essentially residing in a "creative reservation,"¹⁸ prevalent in Ukraine until at least 2014. Meanwhile, critics who had seen the European theatre process outside Ukraine praised the Polish theatre:

If we take a closer look at what is happening in contemporary European theatre, in Polish theatre in particular, we can see: the line of installation, visual theatre, theatre of image, metaphor, and the installation itself, has begun to win. In the second half of the twentieth century, Polish theatre had two strong sources of this theatrical energy (I mean Grotowski and Kantor), and I think this influence is noticeable in the best performances. This applies to both Lupa and his students, for example, Warlikowski and Jarzyna. Those performances that I remember are united by an absolutely free mastery of stage form and a very demanding view of the world, of a man, of his faith, of his relationship with society, and of man's relationship with history.

In addition, we can talk about modern Polish theatre at least at the level of banal statistical facts: for example, Warlikowski is commissioned to play by the Avignon Festival, Lupa is invited to the Vienna Festival (one of the most prestigious in Europe), Jarzyna tours with his plays to the whole world. That is, we see that the Polish theatre, unlike the Ukrainian one, is integrated into Europe.¹⁹

In contrast to the playwrights' theatre, where a real, systematic opening of the Polish theatre never happened, this process unfolded more organically and consistently in the puppet theatre. The International Festival of Puppet Theatres: Christmas Mystery in Lutsk became the first international festival that actively represented the achievements of Polish theatre in Ukraine. The festival, founded in 1993, was held every two years, based at the Volyn Academic Regional Puppet Theatre, until 2006. The festival was inspired by and consulted the famous Polish scholar and puppet theatre historian Henryk Jurkowski (1927–2016), while the artistic director of the Volyn Academic Puppet Theatre, Danylo Poshtaruk (Данило Поштарук), directed it permanently.

Festival organizers hoped to revive a Ukrainian tradition that was banned by the Soviet authorities, namely the Christmas puppet theatre. In his description of the festival's history, Poshtaruk recalled the first trip he took with Jurkowski to Western Ukraine and Volyn:

¹⁸ Myhashko, "Korotka istoriia tvorchoi rezervatsii!"

¹⁹ Świątkowska and Weselowska, *Polska, Kultura, Ukraina*, 106.

Driving from city to city, we visited historical monuments, fortresses, and temples. We drove through the ancient town of Dubno, which was famous in the eighteenth century for its fairs, where the prominent Polish playwright, director, actor, and “father” of Polish theatre Wojciech Bogusławski staged his plays. Naturally, we came to the opinion that puppet theatres must have been performed at these fairs; obviously, they staged “Nativity Scenes.”²⁰

The first Christmas Mystery, in 1993, presented the Łódź Puppet Theatre group Harlekin with a performance based on the traditional German Christmas drama and the amateur Family Nativity Theatre of Olsztyn.²¹ Then, there was the performance of *Pastorałka* by the Theatre of Actors and Puppets from Opole “directed by Krystian Kobyłka and with beautiful scenography by Andrzej Czyczyła.”²² The 2001 festival presented a performance by the Wrocław Puppet Theatre based on the play *Wrocław Acropolis: Nativity Scene* by Jurkowski, especially written for the 1000th anniversary of Wrocław and directed by Wiesław Hejno. At each festival, a scientific symposium Christmas Drama in the Traditions of Puppet Theatres was held, where leading researchers from different countries presented their research on Christmas theatre. A collection of texts was produced as a result of the symposium, published in Lutsk in 2012.²³

A highlight of the 2003 festival was the performance of *The Nativity Scene* by the Andersen Lublin Puppet Theatre, based on a text by the famous modern Ukrainian writer and literary critic Valerii Shevchuk (Валерій Шевчук). As the first nativity play written in independent Ukraine which was presented on the Polish stage, it had symbolic value. Considering that Ukrainian drama was very rarely translated into foreign languages, Polish included, and was even less performed outside Ukraine at that time, this experience was obviously unique and clearly testified to the bilateral development of relations.²⁴

At the final, fifth Christmas Mystery festival, four performances of Polish puppet theatre groups were presented. Three of them, namely Puppet and Actor Theatre from Łomża, Andersen Theatre from Lublin, and the State Puppet Theatre “Tęcza” (Rainbow) from Słupsk, showed different versions of *Polish*

²⁰ Danylo Poshtaruk, “Vertep v konteksti yevropeiskoi kultury,” in *Rizdviana misteria: Materialy naukovoho sympoziumu “Tradytsii rizdvianoi dramy v teatri lialok,”* ed. Nelli Kornienko (Lutsk: PrAT–Volynska oblasna drukarnia, 2013), 4–5.

²¹ Serhii Yefremov, “Rizdviana misteria,” *Ukrainskyi teatr*, no. 2 (1993): 10–12.

²² Borys Holdovskiy, “Volynski misterii,” *Ukrainskyi teatr*, no. 3 (1996): 5–6.

²³ Yefremov, “Rizdviana misteria.”

²⁴ Maiia Harbuziuk, “Nieznyschennist verstepu,” *Prostsennium*, no. 1 (2003): 48–53, <http://publications.lnu.edu.ua/journals/index.php/proscaenium/article/view/1544/1371>.

Nativity Scene by Jurkowski. The theatre company Dagmara Sowa and Paweł Chomczyk presented the *Polish Nativity Scene* based on traditional material.²⁵

Assumably, Christmas Mystery, founded by Henryk Jurkowski and Danylo Poshtaruk, stood out as one of the most striking examples of renewed intercultural dialogue. This was facilitated by the historically grounded concept of the festival, infusing local and regional traditions with a universal Christmas theme, and integrating art and science, theatre and history, ethnography, ethnology, folkloristics, and cultural studies. Nine theatre groups from Poland took part in six festivals (1993–2006), establishing a platform for further communication between Polish and Ukrainian puppeteers. The pivotal moment of Ukraine's accession to UNIMA in 1992 proved to be a transformative milestone for Ukrainian puppeteers, as it not only opened the door to the global puppetry community but also fostered successful international communication among puppeteers.

Consequently, the initial decade of independence witnessed the emergence of prominent theatre festivals in Ukraine and a gradual increase in the inclusion of Polish theatres within their programs. During this phase, the festivals relied on partial funding from state and local authorities to sustain their operation, yet this support did not facilitate the active engagement of internationally renowned participants. As a result, the festival movement during this period relied primarily on enthusiasm, the belief in the potential for positive transformation, and the creative aspirations of artistic directors.

Simultaneously, a detrimental pattern of festival funding was emerging. Right from the outset, festival directors shouldered all the responsibilities, including financial obligations, associated with organizing the events. Frequently resorting to extreme measures, they even pledged their personal assets to secure the necessary funds, since state funding was provided retrospectively, following the culmination of the festivals. Undoubtedly, these challenges impacted the quality and versatility in the showcasing of Polish theatres within the Ukrainian festival landscape, as they hindered the establishment of responsible dialogues and reliable adherence to agreements, particularly in financial matters.

Throughout the entire decade, significant events unfolded in the realm of playwright's theatre, including the notable Berezillia lecture series dedicated to Grotowski and Kantor, as well as the presentation of plays by the renowned Józef Szajna and the emerging talent Grzegorz Jarzyna. These endeavors aimed to pierce through the cultural "blockade" that had persisted for years, yet they proved insufficient in fully revitalizing theatrical circulation.

²⁵ Maïia Harbuziuk, "U mahichnomu prostori Vertepu: vı Rizdviana misteria—2006," *Prostsenium*, no. 1 (2006): 38–44.

The 2000s: “Local Initiatives”

The aforementioned challenges led to a decrease in the vibrancy of prominent international festivals, such as Golden Lion and Berezillia, during the early years of the twenty-first century. In the absence of systematic government support, state programs to develop international cooperation in the theatre sphere, and stable and sufficient funding sources, these festivals ceased to function as prominent international theatre venues. The Artistic Berezillia festival was discontinued in 2003, while the Golden Lion festival declined quantitatively and qualitatively from 2000 onwards: compared to 1998, when 72 performances took place in the festival, in 2000 there were 37, in 2002—24, in 2006—21, and in 2014—17. In 2002, the festival abandoned the idea of an international jury, resulting in a significant drop in public and media interest. The above led Taras Fedorchak, the author of the article “Golden Lion: Update or Die,” to call this festival a dead-end branch of the festival network.²⁶

However, a number of Polish theatres have developed long-term partnerships with the Lviv theatre Voskresinnia and have been participating in the Golden Lion festival on a permanent basis. These are Kraków’s КТО, Bagatela and Wagabunda theatres, Warsaw’s Makata, The Witkacy New Theatre from Słupsk, New Theatre from Łódź, Lublin Provisorium Theatre, Theatre Biuro Podróży, and others. Throughout the festival’s history, the algorithm has remained unchanged: during one season, street performances are featured, then traditional stage formats are combined with street performances. The festival program would be impossible without the presence of many Polish teams working in the genre of street performances.

As large theatre festivals declined in activity and scale in Ukraine at the turn of the twenty-first century, regional and local festivals began to emerge. One cannot ignore the contribution they made to familiarizing the Ukrainian audience with Polish theatre despite the even greater limitations of local human and financial resources.

In 1999, the festival Ternopil Theatre Evenings: Debuts (Ternopil) was founded. This festival takes its name from the Ternopil theatre evenings established in 1915 by Les Kurbas. It serves as a platform for showcasing the works of young directors from Ukraine and abroad. The founder and organizer of the festival was a theatre expert and director of the Shevchenko Academic Drama Theatre in Ternopil Mykhailo Forhel (1952–2006). In the years following his death, the

²⁶ Taras Fedorchak, “Zolotyj lev: Onovliuisia abo pomry,” *Zbruc*, October 30, 2015, <https://zbruc.eu/node/43247>.

festival continued to operate, but, unfortunately, its standing declined significantly.

Since the 2000s, the professional theatre of Elbląg has been a permanent participant in this festival. Ternopil and Elbląg are twin cities, and a large Ukrainian diaspora lives in Elbląg. The theatre's longtime artistic director Mirosław Siedler invested a lot of effort into developing Polish–Ukrainian theatre dialogue. While Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Siedler and shown in Ternopil in 2005 failed to attract much interest, the performance *Cafe Sax* directed by Cezary Domagała in the same year inspired a wider Ukrainian audience to discover Agnieszka Osiecka and the cabaret theatre genre.²⁷

Polish plays also played a role in familiarizing Ukrainian theatre and audiences with contemporary Western drama. In 2004, Ternopil Theatre Evenings presented Martin McDonagh's play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* staged by the Stefan Jaracz Theatre in Olsztyn, directed by the debutant Bartłomiej Wyszomirski. The performance was one of the first opportunities in Ukraine to learn about the playwright's work.²⁸ In 2002, Ukraine was introduced to the work of Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt through Polish theatre. It was during this time that the Stanisław Wyspiański Theatre in Katowice staged a remarkable adaptation of his novel *Oscar and the Lady in Pink*, bringing Schmitt's compelling narrative to a Ukrainian audience.

The Melpomene of Tavrii Festival, established in Kherson in 1999, embarked on its international program in 2003. Initially, the festival's focus centered on the former post-Soviet countries, such as Belarus, Russia, and Moldova, and subsequently expanded to include countries from Southern Europe and the Black Sea region. Among the notable performances, the first Polish play presented at the festival was the aforementioned *Oscar and the Lady in Pink*, performed by the Stanisław Wyspiański Theatre in Katowice in 2003.²⁹ However, Polish theatres were not frequent participants in the overall lineup of the festival.

At the turn of the century, two monopoly festivals were founded in Kyiv: Vidlunnia, organized by the Kyiv Academic Theatre Koleso and its director Iryna Klishchevska (later the theatre also initiated the International Festival of Chamber Theatres Andriyivskyy Fest), as well as the International Festival of Monoplays for Female Actresses Mariia (founder and artistic director—Larysa Kadyrova) held on the Chamber Stage of Franko National Drama Theatre in

²⁷ Maïia Harbuziuk, "Ternopilski teatralni vechory—2005: Debiut," *Prostsensium*, no. 3 (2005): 49–55.

²⁸ Maïia Harbuziuk, "Liudyny vzahal' ne buvaie," *Prostsensium*, no. 3 (2004): 57–61.

²⁹ Melpomena Tavrii, Wikipedia, https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мельпомена_Таврії.

Kyiv. It would be fair to describe the presence of Polish actors and actresses at Vidlunnia as sporadic. In this context, Mariia is proud to have featured an impressive cohort of famous Polish actresses from various generations and schools. The following are Larysa Kadyrova's words regarding her contact with Polish mono-theatres and her admiration of them:

The Polish theatre is the border between the past and the present; it is a knowledge of Western and Eastern styles of theatre and people. The vocabulary of Polish theatre is rich, original, and expressive, and although sometimes a sophisticated director's idea replaces the inner energy of thought and feeling, scenography is always distinguished by purity, graphicness, and ideality of lines. Polish theatre is an adventurous, unbridled, improvisational, free, live performance with a special internal vibration that creates phantom, poetic nature, and airy feelings. . . . Polish theatre is an exquisite, filigree acting technique, and an aesthetic, Hoffmann-like, philosophical, ironic directing technique. That is why, when founding the festival of women's monodramas Mariia, dedicated to Mariia Zankovetska, I considered the participation of Polish actresses mandatory. During eleven years, Ukraine saw the unique actresses from Poland Irena Jun, Barbara Dziekan, Jolanta Juszkiewicz, Elżbieta Rojek, Nina Repetowska, Aleksandra Tomasz, Monika Bolly, Monika Wachowicz, Anna Skubik, and Wioleta Komar, the directors Zbigniew Chrzanowski, Stanisław Melski, and Stanisław Otto Miedziewski, the professors Irena Betko, Zofia Zarębianka, and Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska, and the expert in photography Marek Sendek. Moreover, the master classes of Andrzej Seweryn and Bogusław Kierc completely captivated our artists.³⁰

Among those festivals that encountered formidable challenges and faced significant setbacks, particularly in the realm of Polish–Ukrainian collaboration, the prominent multidisciplinary international festival Gogolfest stands out. Launched in Kyiv in 2007 under the artistic direction of Vlad Troitskyi, the festival's team harbored ambitious plans but also endured significant obstacles. Mariia Yasinska, a longstanding member of the festival's team responsible for Polish-Ukrainian communication, recalls:

during that period, Ukraine did not have a single theatre festival capable of hosting large, impactful productions from Poland or other European countries. This unfortunate situation led to the isolation of Ukrainian theatre from its

³⁰ Larysa Kadyrova, "Mii dialoh z polskoiu teatralnoiu kulturoiu," *Kino-Teatr*, no. 1 (2016), http://archive-ktm.ukma.edu.ua/show_content.php?id=1842.

European counterparts, which was truly disheartening. However, it is worth noting that Ukraine and its theatrical scene remained highly attractive to foreign colleagues. I distinctly recall a visit of a Polish team comprising Grzegorz Reske, Piotr Gruszczyński, and others who attended our festival. Their enthusiasm for the event was palpable as they witnessed the talent of the young team and sought opportunities for collaboration with Ukrainian counterparts.

During that period, Gogolfest held the distinction of being the largest festival in Ukraine. In its initial years, the festival managed to secure funding, primarily through sponsorship, and there was even hope for state support. However, regrettably, the expected state funding did not come to fruition, and the financial assistance of the government was minimal and often delayed. Despite these challenges, the early festivals in Kyiv ignited a genuine explosion of creative energy, accumulating a tremendous amount of enthusiasm and vitality.

At that time, Gogolfest took place at Mystetskii Arsenal, which offered a unique space for performances. However, due to its specific characteristics, not all productions could be accommodated there. One such example was the inability to bring *(A)pollonia* directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski to the festival. If my memory serves me right, none of the stages in Kyiv were suitable for hosting this performance. Remarkably, even to this day, there is no pavilion in existence that can adequately house it.³¹

In 2010, a Polish program was scheduled for the festival, featuring performances by esteemed companies such as Zar Theatre with *Caesarean Section: Essays on Suicide*, Stefan Żeromski Theatre from Kielce with *In the Solitude of Cotton Fields* by Bernard-Marie Koltès, directed by Radosław Rychcik, and Marta Górnicka's mesmerizing *Chór kobiet* (*The Chorus of Women*). Regrettably, circumstances prevented the realization of the planned Polish program, as just before the festival commenced, Mystetskii Arsenal, citing renovations, refused to host the performances. Fortunately, owing to the Dovzhenko Centre stepping in as the new host, Gogolfest was able to proceed, albeit in a significantly condensed format.³²

The precarious state surrounding Gogolfest is evident in a notable document from 2010—an open letter penned by the festival's artistic director, Vlad Troitskyi, addressed to President Viktor Yanukovich (Віктор Янукович):

³¹ Harbuziuk, Interview with Mariia Yasinska.

³² Harbuziuk.

The disruption of a festival of such international magnitude, along with the abrupt cancellation of our agreements involving nearly 1,000 international participants, not only tarnishes Ukraine's global reputation, but also undermines the painstaking efforts invested in establishing a genuine platform for intercultural dialogue within our nation. This setback jeopardizes the progress made in rejuvenating modern Ukrainian culture and its integration into the global context.³³

In the subsequent year, 2011, as the organizers of Gogolfest were preparing to reintroduce one of the most iconic performances from Poland, the festival encountered a significant setback with the complete withdrawal of its funding.

Grzegorz Reske graciously offered to assume the financial responsibility for the Polish program, while Stanislav Moiseev, the artistic director of Molodyi Theatre, generously agreed to host the festival at his venue. Thanks to their support, we were able to showcase a portion of the Polish program, including Marta Górnicka's remarkable production *The Chorus of Women*. This show proved to be pivotal for both the play and Marta herself, as it was in Kyiv that a producer from Lyon noticed their talent and extended an invitation to a renowned festival, opening new doors of opportunity for the director.³⁴

This festival was titled House of Chimera, and featured five performances of Polish theatres, as well as the street performance *Planeta Lem* of the Theatre Biuro Podróży. The performances included *The Brothers Karamazov* by Lublin Theatre Provisorium, *The Blind* by the above-mentioned Kraków Theatre КТО, and others. There was also an educational component to the festival, where Anna R. Burzyńska, Igor Stokfiszewski, and Piotr Gruszczyński discussed modern Polish theatre.³⁵ It was possible to hold the festival owing to The International Cultural Program of the Polish Presidency 2011 under the motto "I, CULTURE."³⁶ House of Chimera could have become a permanent platform for Polish theatre to be presented in Ukraine had it not been a one-time event.

³³ "Hoholfest vyhaniat z 'Mystetskoho arsenalu,'" *Ukrainska pravda*, June 2, 2010. <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2010/06/2/49822/>.

³⁴ Harbuziuk, Interview with Mariia Yasinska.

³⁵ Olha Velymchanytsia, "Veresen polskoho teatru v Kyievi," *Kino-Teatr*, no. 6 (2011), http://archive-ktm.ukma.edu.ua/show_content.php?id=1222.

³⁶ Velymchanytsia, "Veresen polskoho teatru."

Therefore, the conclusion of the second decade of the festival movement in Ukrainian theatre resulted in disheartening outcomes. The absence of sustained state support proved detrimental to the survival of large international festivals. While local festivals remained significant for smaller communities, their impact on the overall situation was not substantial. Moreover, the deepening political and economic crisis in the country exerted a negative impact on the festival movement, stifling its progress. Despite the persevering efforts of the Gogolfest team, Polish theatres did not have adequate opportunities to showcase in Ukraine.

The lack of meaningful dialogue with Western theatre partners became increasingly apparent in Ukraine following Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004. The establishment of the EU–Ukrainian border along the Ukrainian–Polish border further exacerbated Ukraine's isolation from Western cultural influences. Ukrainian theatre artists found themselves confined to a sort of enclave, where the impenetrable border with Poland and the EU resembled a second Berlin Wall, while Russia continued its colonial practices of dominance and pressure, affecting theatre language, aesthetics, technology, and ideology. From the Ukrainian standpoint, Polish theatre seemed distant and unattainable, while from the Polish perspective, Ukrainian theatre remained largely invisible and unfamiliar. Professor Dariusz Kosiński aptly captured this complex situation, "So close, so far" being the title of the preface to a Polish-Ukrainian publication of 2010, which described the collaboration between the Les Kurbas Centre in Kyiv and the Grotowski Centre in Wrocław. Emphasizing that modern Ukrainian theatre is virtually unknown in Poland, the scholar identified several factors contributing to this state of affairs:

historical events driven by the long-term dominance of "Soviet" art over Ukrainian art. Trends and directions of fashionable theatre voyages, which are more westward-oriented, also play a role. Unfortunately, the prevalent sense of Poland's superiority and, concurrently, the inadequate policy of promoting Ukrainian culture abroad are factors that contribute to it as well.³⁷

Hence, the assessment of the second decade of the festival movement in Ukraine, particularly in the Polish-Ukrainian realm, leans towards a negative, and even critical, correlation of gains and losses.

³⁷ Dariusz Kosiński, "Tak blisko, daleko tak," in Świątkowska and Weselowska, *Polska, Kultura, Ukraina*, 5.

The 2010s: Dramaturgical and Performative “Landing Forces”

The Ukrainian theatre has begun to undergo qualitative changes since 2011, especially in the field of drama. The launch of the festivals The Topical Play Week in Kyiv and Drama.UA in Lviv led to the formation of a new generation of playwrights. While The Topical Play Week (co-organised by Natalka Vorozhbyt [Наталка Ворожбит], Andrii Mai [Андрій Май], and Marysia Nikitiuk [Марися Нікітюк]) was closely connected with the Russian documentary theatre and festivals (Lubimovka, etc.), the festival in Lviv, headed by the historian Oksana Dudko (Оксана Дудко), focused on the Western topical drama, involving practitioners from the British Royal Court and Polish colleagues and authors.

At both festivals, the presence of Polish playwrights via texts and personal participation was essential. Through these festivals, which intensified translation activity, audiences in Ukraine came into contact with works by Tadeusz Słobodzianek, Dorota Masłowska, Paweł Demirski, Michał Walczak, and others. Many stage readings of these and other Polish authors were held in Ukraine, contributing to the popularity of Polish drama today. These and other contemporary Polish authors then appeared in Ukrainian productions directed by Ukrainian directors. The Polish Institute in Kyiv, which has promoted and supported Polish drama in Ukraine since 2011, played a significant role in this.

First at Kyiv's The Topical Play Week and later at Kharkiv's Kurbalesiya and Lviv's Drama.Ua, Ukrainian alternative theatre representatives met Polish playwright, director, curator, and performer Joanna Wichowska (1969–2022). As part of the The Topical Play Week in 2014, Wichowska gave a lecture on post-dramatic theatre, in which she suggested something odd for Ukrainian theatre at that time: Theatre is an act of confrontation.³⁸ Her project *Maps of Fear. Maps of Identity* (2018–2019) served as a catalyst for the emergence of a new wave of Ukrainian theatre performers.

From 2014, Ukrainian theatres were engaged in various types of projects. This is the model of international cooperation that became definitive in international theatrical communication, since it is much more dynamic and relevant in its form. However, due to their cost and organizational challenges, theatre festivals became more and more modest, especially during wartime.

In parallel, Ukrainian theatres began to appear in festivals in Poland: East-West in Krakow, the 12th Bliscy Nieznajomi (Close Strangers): Ukraine festival (2019), and the 15th Bliscy Nieznajomi (Close Strangers): East festival (2021) in

³⁸ Joanna Wichowska, “Provokatsiia idei,” *Teatre*, December 18, 2014, <http://teatre.com.ua/modern/rovokatsiia-idej-oanna-ixovska-pro-postdramatycznyj-teatr/>.

Poznań (director's list includes Joanna Wichowska), Retroperspektywy (Łódź, Chorea Theatre), to name just a few. Regarding the short- and medium-term prospects, we can probably expect a "reverse" movement from east to west, transforming the Polish-Ukrainian stage into something qualitatively new.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the festival movement in the country has ground to a halt. Many Ukrainian artists, seeking refuge and opportunities, moved abroad, particularly to Poland. Presently, it is undeniable that the focal point of Polish-Ukrainian theatre dialogue has shifted to Poland, while the war in Ukraine persists. Nevertheless, there are glimpses of a reverse trend beginning to emerge. On May 27, 2023, a momentous occasion unfolded as Maja Kleczewska's rendition of Mickiewicz's *Dziady* premiered at the Ivan Franko National Theatre in Ivano-Frankivsk, signifying the early signs of a revitalized theatrical exchange.

Examining the aforementioned facts and events, we can discern three distinct categories of participants engaged in Polish-Ukrainian festival communication within Ukraine. The first group comprises the actual "agents of change," encompassing theatre professionals from both sides of the border who have demonstrated a strong determination to foster the agency of theatre as a crucial component of intercultural exchange with the Western world. The second group comprises state authorities and ministries, unfortunately, the least supportive in facilitating the qualitative advancement of this dialogue. The prevalence of pro-Russian narratives, the absence of a comprehensive cultural and artistic state policy, economic and political instability, two revolutions (in 2004 and 2013–2014), and the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine all serve as indicators of a profound crisis within Ukrainian society.

During this entire period, members of the third category, namely professional theatre scholars and critics, consistently highlighted the issues concerning the inadequate presence of Polish theatre in Ukraine, specifically on the festival circuit. As early as 2010, participants of the aforementioned roundtable discussion titled "Polish theatre through the eyes of Ukrainian researchers" expressed their concerns:

I think we can all conclude that we know very little about Polish theatre today. We know it at the level of individual names, performances, and facts. But in general, if we have a certain system in mind, then we do not have a clear picture of Polish theatre.³⁹

³⁹ Świątkowska and Wesołowska, *Polska, Kultura, Ukraina*, 104–105.

I consider our conversations abstract since not a single play by Krystian Lupa has been shown in Ukraine. . . . I do not even know if many people in Ukraine, in particular experts, have seen these plays.⁴⁰

For an extended period, the situation remained unchanged, showing no signs of improvement. Serhii Vasyliiev wrote in 2018:

The majority of Ukrainian theatre professionals have a very vague idea about what is happening in the world, not to mention the audience. Suffice it to say that they have never seen and, in the foreseeable future, are unlikely to get a chance to see performances directed by Robert Lepage and Robert Wilson, Luk Perceval and Krzysztof Warlikowski, Katie Mitchell and Heiner Goebbels, Christoph Marthaler and Ivo van Hove, or Alvis Hermanis and Sasha Waltz, or by other masters who shape modern European theatre.⁴¹

In 2019, Olena Myhashko (Олена Мигашко), a representative of the younger generation of critics, expressed her poignant observation, following in his footsteps:

The situation we are in allows us to make an assumption: a powerful (or at least noticeable) theatre culture is not created by a bunch of interregional awards, nor by three or four noisy bloggers, nor even by the solid funding of an internal product. It is created thanks to mobility and fruitful dialogue with the first echelon of the theatre world. Today, Ukraine looks at the brilliance of the Western European theatre, as if a prisoner were looking through a window at the stinging flashes of heavenly whiteness.⁴²

The prevailing situation in culture, art, and specifically in the Polish-Ukrainian theatre dialogue, mirrored the broader socio-political crisis engulfing the nation. In a monograph published in 2020, the authors posited that “Ukraine, despite nearing its thirtieth anniversary, remained in a limitrophe state, teetering on the precipice of a global civilizational divide.”⁴³ At that time, public opinion polls revealed that over half of Ukrainians (59%) believed the country was heading in the wrong direction.⁴⁴ This limitrophe state manifested itself through disarray in

⁴⁰ Świątkowska and Weselowska, 103.

⁴¹ Serhii Vasyliiev et al., *Ukrainskyi teatr: Shliakh do sebe: Zdobutky, Vyglyk, Problemy* (Kyiv: Sofiya, 2018), 12.

⁴² Myhashko, “Korotka istoriia tvorchoi rezervatsii”

⁴³ Maiboroda, *Subiektivist Ukrainy*, 4.

⁴⁴ Maiboroda, 65.

the country's internal affairs, the existence of opposing civilizational orientations (pro-Russian or Eurasian versus pro-Western or European), accompanied by societal divisions based on age, weakened national bonds, heightened regionalization of political elites, and tensions among linguistic, ethnic, and religious groups representing different regions.⁴⁵

When asked about the losses incurred due to the ineffective dialogue between Ukrainian and Polish theatre, Maria Yasinska underlined:

Poland served as a gateway to Europe for us. Apart from its own remarkable theatrical heritage, embodied by the works of Kantor and Grotowski, it had powerful classical theatre, which remains relatively unfamiliar to us. We will never see them. While Polish theatre drew significant inspiration from German theatre, we were devoid of Western theatrical influence. It's akin to a child who is denied a mirror and is unable to see their own reflection. Without something to reflect upon, one's self-realization becomes hindered. We had no role models to aspire to, no benchmarks to strive for.

Polish theatre has a distinct political nature. By engaging in a dialogue with it, Ukrainian theatre had the potential to serve as a powerful catalyst for transformative change in the minds of its citizens. Polish theatre, with its reflective processes and acute exploration of social issues through the works of Strzépka and Demirski, could present an opportunity for us to witness and learn how to address our own traumas, narratives, and societal challenges. Regrettably, none of these envisioned possibilities came to fruition.

In general, Polish theatre could have emerged as a compelling alternative to the Russian theatrical tradition, which held significant influence over multiple generations of theatre practitioners. It was customary for anyone seeking artistic achievement to gravitate towards Moscow. However, the onset of war disrupted this trajectory. Instead, we could have ventured in the opposite direction, exploring the potential of a different theatrical path.

Concluding Remarks

Providing any predictions within a country engulfed in war is an arduous undertaking. However, amidst this ongoing war, a significant development has emerged, in particular, a profoundly transformative and fully-fledged agency for

⁴⁵ Maiboroda, 61–62.

the nation. This newfound agency encompasses the state, political, diplomatic, and cultural realms, obtained through immense and irreplaceable sacrifices, rendering it invaluable. In this context, the importance and imperative of equitable international dialogue across all domains, including theatre, cannot be overstated. Ukraine has traversed three decades to arrive at this irreversible juncture, and it must exert every effort, in collaboration with its foreign partners, to uphold this newfound status. Consequently, the recognition and exploration of contemporary Polish theatre within Ukraine are integral to our complete integration into the European community. It opens doors to both learning and teaching, fostering the ability to assimilate and contribute. Ultimately, this aligns with the future of theatre festivals and their significance.

Amidst the backdrop of the ongoing war, it is crucial to contemplate the principles that will govern future collaborations in times of peace. Lessons learned from past decades should serve as a deterrent against repeating past mistakes, particularly in the realm of international communication, where theatre festivals play a vital role. For international festivals in Ukraine to thrive, several key elements are indispensable. Foremost among these is the establishment of a new state policy dedicated to fostering cultural endeavors. Furthermore, robust financial support from both governmental and grant sources is imperative, along with sustained attention, vigorous promotion, and diverse forms of interaction spanning from individual to institutional levels.



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