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Romeo and Juliet: From a Performance for Teenagers to an Innovative Dramatic Performance in the Time of War

Abstract

The article offers an overview of the reception history of *Romeo and Juliet* in Ukraine. In the Ukrainian lands that were part of the Russian Empire, *Romeo and Juliet* began to be staged at Russian-language theatres at the end of the 19th century. In the Ukrainian SSR, the tragedy was performed in Ukrainian translations from the late 1930s. Leading theatres in independent Ukraine also adapted *Romeo and Juliet*. For instance, the Frankivsk Drama Theatre

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(2021, directed by Rostyslav Derzhypil'skyi) staged *Romeo & Juliet* using Yurii Andrukhovych's translation. Since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war, this performance has been experimental in its spatial design and approach to the characters, reflecting the pain of the time.

Keywords: performance, *Romeo & Juliet*, Ivano-Frankivsk Drama Theatre, post-apocalyptic theatre, Russo-Ukrainian war.

When studying the staging history of Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* in Ukraine, it is necessary to distinguish between productions by Russian-language theatres in Ukraine and the enactment of *Romeo and Juliet* in Ukrainian. Since the 1810s, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* were most often staged in Polish-language and Russian-language theatres in the ethnic lands of Ukraine. The troupe under the direction of Ludwik Młotkowski (1795–1855) even staged *Coriolanus* in Kharkiv in the 1830s.

However, troupes and directors began to turn to *Romeo and Juliet* only at the end of the 19th century. It is known from Maryna Grynyshyna's book (Grynyshyna 959) that as early as 1894, *Romeo and Juliet* was staged by Nikolai Solovtsov in the Russian language at Solovtsov's Drama Theatre, one of the first permanent theatres of Kyiv. In her memoirs, actress Mariia Velizarii (Velizarii 156), the first Ukrainian performer to appear as Juliet, notes that she was the initiator of the production, choosing the role of Juliet for her benefit performance. The director of the play was not Nikolai Solovtsov, who, after he failed in *Othello* in the previous year, was sceptical about productions based on Shakespeare's pieces, but his assistant B. Borysov (Velizarii 162).

Thanks to the help of theatre scholar Yuliana Poliakova (personal communication, 18 January 2025), we were able to find articles in the Kharkiv press of the turn of the 1900s, which records the facts and circumstances of the first and second productions of *Romeo and Juliet* in Russian on the Kharkiv stage. In 1895, the production was staged by unknown director Aleksandrov (138) in the private theatre enterprise of Aleksandra Diukova in the same premises where the Ukrainian Drama Theatre operates today. The production was initiated by actress Mariia Mondschein, who took the role of Juliet for her benefit performance (*Yuzhnyi krai* 4 February 1895 3). The memoirs of actress Mariia Velizarii, the features of whose live action in the Kharkiv production on tour in 1896 were recorded in a review, helped to clarify the director of the performance (*Yuzhnyi krai* 6 February 1896 2). In 1900, another Kharkiv Russian-language troupe ran by Ivan Tohobochnyi staged the premiere of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Summer Theatre in the Tivoli Garden for the benefit of actress Yelena Kutuzova (*Yuzhnyi krai* 28 May 1900 3). So, the first productions of *Romeo and Juliet* in Ukraine were brought to life by the desire of

the leading actresses to play the role of Juliet, but directing in three performances in Kyiv and Kharkiv was an auxiliary and indistinct component.

The topic of staging Shakespeare's works, in particular, *Romeo and Juliet* in German and Polish in the theatres in the Austro-Hungarian Empire-ruled portion of modern-day western Ukraine in the late 18th–early 20th centuries is not studied enough by Ukrainian art historians and requires further research that goes beyond the subject matter of this article.

The stage performance of Shakespeare's plays in Ukraine, which at that time was divided among the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, was considered the prerogative of companies that performed in Russian or German and Polish, respectively. Only in 1906, the censorship restriction on the theatres in the ethnic Ukrainian lands belonging to the Russian Empire to stage the pieces of world drama in Ukrainian was lifted. This restriction was regulated by the infamous Ems Ukaz of Emperor Alexander II issued in 1876. Specifically, this explains that the heroes of William Shakespeare's pieces in the full volume of his dramatic heritage began to speak Ukrainian only in theatres of the newly-emerged states: these were the performances of *Macbeth* staged by Les Kurbas in Uman (1921, Ukrainian SSR) and *Othello* staged by Oleksandr Zaharov in the Ukrainian Besida Theatre in Lviv (1923, Poland). It is noteworthy that back in 1918, the avant-garde Ukrainian theatre director Les Kurbas had an idea for the first production of *Romeo and Juliet* in Ukrainian in the Molodyi Teatr (Young Theatre), Kyiv. However, the forced merger of his company with the company of the State Drama Theatre prevented this project from being accomplished.

Romeo and Juliet first appeared on the stage of a Ukrainian theatre in 1938. It was a production directed by Mykola Yesypenko at Dnipropetrovsk (now Dnipro) Theatre for the Young. A Ukrainian translation made by Abram Hosenpoud in 1937 was used for this production. Since then, this tragedy has long been associated by theatre directors with teenage and youth audiences. This was confirmed by the appeal of this play by director Borys Oseledchuk of Chkalov (now Mykolaiv) Theatre for the Young in 1951. The first researcher of stage enactments of William Shakespeare's dramaturgy on the theatre stages of the republic (then the Ukrainian SSR), Iryna Vanina in 1964, noted the excessive sociologisation of the first interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* (Vanina 147). In fact, in the Ukrainian theatre of the USSR times, the cliché interpretation of this tragedy as a family drama exposing the feudal traditions of the 'Westerners' became the norm. In 1952, a new translation of *Romeo and Juliet* into Ukrainian was published, whose literary and theatrical potential remains relevant today. Its author, Iryna Steshenko – the granddaughter of the famous Ukrainian poet, prose writer, playwright and director Mykhailo Starytskyi – had two educations: acting and classical university, and worked at 'Berezil' Theatre with Les Kurbas. During Soviet political repressions, especially the Great Purge, her mother, aunt, brother, and cousin were executed; after the forced end of her

acting career at the Kharkiv Drama Theatre in 1947, Iryna Steshenko actively took up translations of classical world drama. In addition to productions in theatres for the young, *Romeo and Juliet* was staged in Ukrainian in regional musical and dramatic theatres, the aesthetics of which gravitated toward the mass stage action of actors, choir and ballet, e.g. *Romeo and Juliet* in Drohobych Theatre, 1963, director Mykhailo Hiliarovskyi; *Romeo and Juliet* in T.H. Shevchenko Theatre in Chernihiv, 1986, director Petro Lastivka (Zahurska and Lypkivska 917).

Therefore, both trends highlight the positional inferiority of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Ukrainian theatre of the Soviet period. After all, since the 1940s, other Shakespeare tragedies were staged on the leading dramatic stages of Ukraine. These were *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, and *King Lear*.¹ Elvira Zahurska and Hanna Lypkivska argue, however, that the first attempt to modernise the intonations of classic Shakespearean heroes took place in the production of Oleksandr Barsegian in the Kyiv Theatre for the Young (1965) (Zahurska and Lypkivska 917). Many years later, in independent Ukraine, this capital-based Theatre for the Young returned to the Veronese tragedy again (2002). However, this time *Romeo and Juliet* was staged as a musical by director Viktor Hyrych, with music by composer Viacheslav Nazarov and lyrics by Shakespeare and Oleksandr Vratariov. In Ukrainian theatre, *Romeo and Juliet* emerged from the reservations surrounding secondary theatres, and the inferior status assigned to it by the Soviet tradition. Only after Ukraine's independence restoration, the Ukrainian theatre first turned to *Romeo and Juliet* during the early Independence years (Maria Zankovetska Drama Theatre in Lviv, director Fedir Stryhun, 1993). At the Ternopil Drama Theatre, the tragedy translated by Iryna Steshenko was staged by Viacheslav Zhyla (2002). Stage interpretations of the play followed in the decades afterwards with the production by the Ivan Franko National Theatre, directed by Valentyn Kozmenko-Delinde (2005); the Kyiv Theatre of Drama and Comedy, directed by Oleksii Lisovets (2005); the Molodyi Teatr, (former Kyiv Youth Theatre until 1995) in 2005; and the 'Atelier 16' Theatre (2006) both directed by Ihor Tykhomyrov. This was related to the fact that a new conceptualisation of stage adaptations appeared. For example, the transfer of time and place to the present day was a sign of updating the tragedy in Lisovets's production, as was portraying the Montague and Capulet patriarchs

1 In chronological order: *Hamlet* directed by Yosyp Hirniak, the Drama Sector of the Lviv Opera Theatre, 1943; *Othello* directed by Oleksii Hlaholin, 1952; *Hamlet* directed by Benedikt Nord, 1956, at the Kharkiv Drama Theatre; *Hamlet* directed by Borys Tyahno at the Lviv Drama Theatre, 1957; *King Lear* directed by Vasyl Sychevsky at the Rivne Ukrainian Drama Theatre, 1956; directed by Volodymyr Ohloblin at the Ukrainian Drama Theatre, 1959; and directed by Mykhailo Hiliarovskyi at the Lviv Drama Theatre, 1969; *Richard III* directed by Serhii Danchenko, 1973 – both at the Lviv Drama Theatre, and directed by Anatolii Lytko at the Kharkiv Drama Theatre, 1976.

as mafia Dons like Vito Corleone (Zahurska and Lypkivska 926). According to Zahurska and Lypkivska, this production found an innovative solution for Romeo, performed by the thirty-year-old actor Ahtem Seitablayev with Hamletian maturity and concentration. From his first entrance, the striking difference between Seitablayev's Romeo and the other younger men of the Montague and Capulet clans introduced a tragic dissonance. It was Romeo's worldview, and not his meeting with Juliet, that promised a tragic outcome to the hero's fate.

The fact that Andrii Zholdak's last premiere of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Kharkiv Drama Theatre in 2005 was banned from public performance and that he was fired from his position as the theatre's director is noteworthy for understanding the radical changes in Ukrainian directors' attitude to *Romeo and Juliet*. The performance was staged in the formats of the artist's theatre and post-dramatic theatre, a concept introduced and substantiated by the German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann, who, in particular, identified the absence of a stable plot in the performance and the focus of its creators on the contact between performers and the audience as a feature of the most radical type of post-dramatic theatre (Lehmann 16). Andrii Zholdak's version of *Romeo and Juliet* included artistic devices that were not standard and acceptable for a state-owned Ukrainian theatre, such as nudity of actors, imitation of mass smearing with excrement, and it carried a shocking social message.

Equally novel and in-the-now was the *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi, managing and artistic director of Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre in Ivano-Frankivsk. This was not the only Shakespeare play in the repertoire of the 'Frankovians:' since 2017, it included *HAMLET. Neo Horror Opera*, and was followed by *Romeo & Juliet: drama per musica*, which opened in 2021 as part of Derzhypilskyi's duology. According to the Frankovians themselves, *Romeo & Juliet* was produced in the genre of *Dramma per musica*. On the theatre's website, the director's interpretation of the play's connection with contemporary realities is described as: "[a] post-apocalyptic version of Shakespeare's saddest tragedy in an experimental format. The love story of the pure hearts of Romeo and Juliet in the depraved post-apocalyptic Verona" (*Romeo & Juliet*. Ivano-Frankivsk Drama Theatre). Alongside Derzhypilskyi, the creators of the concept of this production were the famous Ukrainian composers and musicians Illia Razumeiko and Roman Hryhoriv, the stage designer Yuliia Zaulychna, and the choreographer Olha Semioshkina. Joining this creative team, the prose writer, poet, essayist, and translator Yurii Andrukhovych was commissioned to supply a contemporised translation of *Romeo and Juliet* by its director, Derzhypilskyi. This was much alike Andrukhovych's *Hamlet* commissioned by director Stas Moiseiev for Molodyi Teatr, used by Derzhypilskyi in his *HAMLET. Neo Horror Opera* (2017). Andrukhovych's translation of *Romeo and Juliet* is characterised by a change in the poetic style of expression of the characters (except for scenes involving the

main characters) to a mundane, everyday style, with the use of cultural quotations, slang and, in some places, vulgar vocabulary.

Sharing the unified concept of Derzhypil'skyi's duology, Andrukhovych's translation of *Romeo and Juliet* is as striking as his *Hamlet*, in its anti-intellectualism, figurative simplification of expression in comparison with the original, the presence of extremely brutal vocabulary – in particular, Yurii Andrukhovych's *Hamlet* is speaking in short lines, without bookish prettyisms' (Kolomiyets 178). As the translation studies scholar Lada Kolomiyets emphasises, a major feature of the translation is the desire to follow the mainstream of mass culture "with an expressive focus on the conversational culture of contemporary regular folks" (Kolomiyets 179). As Polish theatre researcher Ewa Bal wrote about translations of Shakespeare's works by Yurii Andrukhovych: "contemporary Ukrainian translations of the classics are a matter of breaking away from forcibly inculcated Russian modes of literature, to capture the idiom of Ukraine's middle and young post-Soviet generation" (Bal). Indeed, both of the above-mentioned stage productions directed by Derzhypil'skyi challenged audience expectations schooled for decades in the reverential attitude towards William Shakespeare as an untouchable world classic. The director offered his own, completely different *Hamlet. Neo Horror Opera*, which cut through theatrical clichés enshrined in the mass consciousness over the many years of the 'sacralisation' of Shakespeare's masterpiece. Bringing the Renaissance story of the Veronese "star-crossed lovers" as close as possible to the tragic and stressful reality of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, the production made the locations, language, and the world in which the play's characters lived painfully recognisable without making the key ideas of the tragedy expendable. It is noteworthy that the director presented the titles of both plays on the posters in the original English language. For *Romeo and Juliet*, Derzhypil'skyi replaced "and" with "&" (i.e. an ampersand), thus presenting the title as *Romeo & Juliet*, a method of writing the title that distinguishes Shakespeare's duology in the repertoire of the Ivano-Frankivsk Drama Theatre by its attempt to attract younger audiences and meet their penchant for pithiness and visual recognition of titles. Derzhypil'skyi's stage version differs from the translation of *Romeo and Juliet* by Yu. Andrukhovych published in 2016 (*Romeo i Dzhulietta* [Romeo and Juliet]), owing to significant abridgements made by the director. The prologue and epilogue of the tragedy are not heard in the performance. Some minor characters are missing: Prince Escalus, Benvolio, the Capulet servants – Peter, Sampson and Gregory, the Montague servants – Abram and Balthazar, Friar John, and the apothecary. The performance includes inserted texts from *Macbeth*, *The Revelation of John the Theologian* and from the *Requiem Mass*.

The concept of the production was based on the duality of existence: sin and holiness, death and life, love and hate, past and future. Instead of the Prologue's sonnet, Derzhypil'skyi's production opened with the three chanting Erinyes

(chthonic goddesses of vengeance in ancient Greek religion and mythology). Seemingly straight out of *Macbeth*, in this production the Erinyes (Halyna Barankevych, Nadiia Levchenko and Olesia Pasichniak) were the harbingers of retribution for sins. Their voices, physical presence, movements, and their costumes created a mystical and disturbing atmosphere for the tragedy. The costumes of these characters combine modern fashion with elements of archaic costume. In particular, the actresses' heads are decorated and their chins are tightly pulled together with cocoon hats, reminiscent of the headdresses of Middle Age noble city women. The whiteness of their faces and necklines contrasts mournfully with the black fabric of their long dresses. The cut of the clothes and details of the props (daggers in the belt) refer the viewer to the images of warlike Amazons. The director committed specifically the performers of Erinyes to pronounce the first words of the play, words taken from *Macbeth* about evil in good and good in evil. Following them, the audience is bombarded with the laser lighting of a nightclub, and loud depressive techno music, accompanied by male homophonic singing live to the text of *Dies Irae*. And the eerie howling of the performers of the roles of Erinyes serves as an echo of the male singing. In direct contrast with the mythical figures of the Erinyes, the action of Shakespeare's tragedy was firmly located in the contemporary world. Romeo met Juliet in a nightclub; Romeo and his father worked out in the gym; the Nurse went out on a drinking spree. The frantic rhythm of the hellish carnival of the first half contrasted with the almost static purgatory of the second. Duality manifested in everything: in locations, costumes, tempo and music.

When the production first opened in 2021, the production's location traded on duality: the first act took place in the post-industrial site of the mechanical workshop of PromPrylad Plant, an Industrial Instruments production site. In doing so, the director introduced an amount of further characters into the performance: by accepting the rules of the performance and their immersion in the production, the spectators fell not only under the spell, but also the responsibility of the director Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi. As active participants, they found themselves in a post-apocalyptic environment and, like the actors, they had to negotiate their way in the vast, derelict Soviet plant, among abandoned machinery covered in rust. Correspondents from the *Reuters* news agency attended the premiere, which marked a breakthrough in the Ukrainian theatre's relationship with the global media. On the peculiarity of immersing the audience in this version of Shakespeare's plot, the *Reuters* wrote: "Before the performance starts, spectators are given hard hats and a map to navigate through the factory's workshops and on to the theatre's basement" ("Romeo and Juliet Find New Stage"). In an interview with *Reuters*, actor Oleh Panas, who plays Romeo, shared his thoughts on the specifics of directing in the immersive theatre: "On one hand, the location swallows the actor, it is hard not to get lost inside this colossal setting," Panas said. "But on the other

hand, it adds value to the performance concept and to the actor's emotions. A cold, massive area, stairs – all these elements strengthen an actor's feelings" ("*Romeo and Juliet* Find New Stage").² Encapsulating rave music, the sounds of grinding iron, laser nightclub lighting, and the ability to move between locations in the venue, prepared the viewer for the performance. The music grew louder and spectators often began to move to the beat, thus transforming from the state of observers to the state of participants and accomplices to the action. The set of *Romeo & Juliet* was vast: the playing areas were located at different levels from floor to ceiling, which created perceptual difficulties for the audience as they had to quickly adapt to shifting perspectives.

The actors' delivery of the lines did not always reach the recipients due to machinery rattle and loud noises, but the circumstances in which the director immersed those present made it impossible not to understand and feel what was happening around them. The duel between Mercutio and Tybalt, for example, turned into a fight club scene with no rules. The crowd took their seats around a cage, making it impossible to remain indifferent to the stage action unfolding so close. In close combat, "the bodies of the two opponents Mercutio and Tybalt made terrible noises when hitting the floor which was made of a wooden base covered with tatami mats. Tybalt's athletic wear bore the inscription *Bad Boy*, fashionista Mercutio sported expensive leather gloves" (Shchukina and Vaniuha). Underlined by dark and gloomy lighting, "the spectators saw the intertwined athletic bodies of the actors, mixing their fake blood, smelling of male sweat, and hearing their accelerated heartbeat. This [...] hand-to-hand combat was accompanied by the frantic tempo of Balkan-style music" (Shchukina and Vaniuha). The first death, that of Mercutio, leaves a terrible impression on the audience. If Tybalt and Mercutio fight as equals before this, then after Romeo's mistaken intervention Tybalt gains the upper hand over his opponent. The *mise-en-scène* signals the supposed fracture of Mercutio's spine by Tybalt, which becomes the cause of Romeo's friend's death. The horror experienced by Mercutio's last dying convulsions in his friend's arms tripled his strength in the desire to take revenge on Tybalt, who brazenly walked around the ring during the entire time of the friends' dying conversation. Romeo's fight with Tybalt was twice as short as the first. To the screams of the frightened Nurse, Romeo fought with feline dexterity and grace and, in the end, broke his enemy's neck. In fact,

² A noteworthy and at the same time pleasant fact was that, following *Reuters*, information about the Ukrainian premiere of *Romeo & Juliet* was spread by the news portals: *Dubai92* (United Arab Emirates), the Turkish *Daily Sabah*, the Saudi *Asharq al Awsat*, etc., which allowed us to speak about the activation of discourse about Ukrainian theatre in the Near and Middle East.

the metal cage was the center of the universe for the living realm of death: it was multifunctional and polysemantic. It served first as a gym where the youth of Verona hardened their bodies; then as a ring where Ivan Blindar and Yurii Vykhovanets, as Mercutio and Tybalt, enacted a frighteningly real cage match. (Torkut and Shchukina 536)

However, this display of violence was only the beginning of the spectators' experience: in part two, the tragedy extended beyond the production plant and spilt into the streets of Ivano-Frankivsk. Actors and spectators formed Juliet's funeral cortege, walking from the first performance space, i.e. the plant, to the theatre building in the city centre (they are located two blocks apart from each other). The spectators who had turned into participants of the performance had to explain to random passers-by what was happening and who was being buried so magnificently. As such, theatre was seeping into real life.

The second act moved to another location, the Ivano-Frankivsk Theatre basement. This was uncomfortable in its own way: there was little space and air, sounds were muffled under the pressure of the low ceiling as the actors, as well as their audience, were then located underneath the main stage, in the theatre basement. The euphoria of the first act was overshadowed by depression and impasse as the performance of *Romeo & Juliet* descended into this basement that represented the Capulets' crypt, where the audience sat on makeshift raked seats that resembled stadium stands. Those engineering structures, machinery, and technological equipment, which are usually hidden from the audience's view in the theatre, became integral to Derzhypilskyi's *Romeo & Juliet* throughout. From its setting in the abandoned factory to the basement of the theatre, the play's spatial semantics underscored its concept of destroyed and crushed romantic love.

Particularly striking was the intense passion that sprang up at first sight between Romeo and Juliet, a passion that seems doomed in a mechanical, iron, and urban world. The visual image of the heating system hanging over the scenery in the theatre basement added an urbanised interpretation of the tragedy. In this versatile scenographic installation, the metal cage functioned "as the crypt where Romeo comes to die. It was in this very cage that Friar Lawrence (Oleksii Hnatkovskyi) reads aloud the text of the Apocalypse at the beginning of the play's second half" (Torkut and Shchukina 536). By shortening the text of the tragedy, Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi deprived the character of the main heroine of internal conflict and effectiveness. The understanding of the unearthly harmony that a troubled Romeo meets in the person of Juliet was emphasized by the baroque soprano vocal of Inna Bevza (Juliet). In the second version of the performance (only in the basement of the theatre, from the beginning of the performance), the theme of the murdered love of Romeo and Juliet seemed present to the audience as an enchanted, beautiful image: behind the bars of the apocalyptic Verona, Juliet silently mourned dead Romeo lying on her lap.

Designer Yuliia Zaulychna chose the same colour scheme for costumes for almost all the characters. The dark tones of clothing worn by the representatives of both families conveyed the destructiveness of the adult world: this play serves as a tragedy of youth. From the beginning, both the Montegues and the Capulets were doomed to mourn, as their dark robes suggested. Fur accessories emphasised the general atmosphere of the performance in which the rivalry of clans seemed to be the struggle between predatory beasts. In contrast to this image of violence, Juliet was dressed in white, a symbol of purity. At the beginning of part two, however, Romeo and Juliet took turns when watching the action dispassionately from pedestals like statues on tombs as their destinies were decided upon. However, the character created by Oleh Panas had theatrical dynamics. Consistently refusing all the status privileges of a clan descendant, including access to the depraved women at his father's orgy parties, he sought only one true value: the image of pure love and a divinely blessed marriage with Juliet. His costume changed in tune with how the character himself changed. At the beginning, Romeo was dressed in dark colours, no different from his family; later on, he was clad in white – the colour of (his love for) Juliet, which symbolized the purification of his soul.

However, it was not only Romeo and Juliet who attracted attention with alternative attitudes to this apocalyptic reality. The director introduced an innovative reading of the minor characters of Shakespeare's play in the young Ukrainian stage tradition. The actors play their roles with the involvement of physical theatre. Apart from the main characters, all the characters fussed excessively; the actors display exaggerated movement and gestures, and a clearly expressed theatrical delivery of the text. The young boosy Nurse's gait is excessively unsteady, and her movements and facial expressions were also vulgar. In the first part of the play, the director molded all the images of the characters, except Romeo and Juliet, in a tragicomic vein. Even when amplified by microphones, the significance of Shakespeare's words and entire phrases was often drowned by various noises. In the world of gang wars, where young mothers have long turned into soulless style icons, Capulet (Yurii Khvostenko), Juliet's father gets drunk with his business partner Paris (Andrii Melnyk) and gives him a daughter; in part two, he impressed with a tour de force in portraying Capulet as a neurasthenic patriarch.

Derzhypil'skyi enlarged and rejuvenated the Nurse's part. From a service role in Shakespeare's text, the director effectively created another female tragedy. Watching the full-blooded and colourful heroine performed by Olha Komanovska, it became clear that Juliet, fed by the milk of this life-loving German woman, did not inherit her 'wax' mother's features and behaviour but the Nurse's recklessness, directness, and vibrancy. It was these traits that, in a sexualised sense, brought the Nurse closer to Romeo's friend, the witty Mercutio. Ivan Blindar sharpened the features of showiness and the physicality of Mercutio's stage presence; his modernity was emphasized by his vocal range which ran closer to rap. As imagined

by the director, this production's couple: Mercutio and the Nurse had the genre and stylistic colouring of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* rather than that of Shakespearean romantic tragedy. However, as a result of her devastating losses, the death of her beloved Mercutio and Tybalt's demise as the hope of the Capulet dynasty, the Nurse became a shadow of her former self. Olha Komanovska's physical movements and facial expressions often appeared spasmodic in part two – this heroine seemed to be short of breath.

Juliet also changed in the second part of the production: she seemed in an altered state of consciousness. The director achieved this effect not by means of psychological allusions, but by showing the audience a reality through the eyes of the heroine. With Romeo banished, time had stood still for Juliet. Even before she drank the potion, Juliet began to cool down and slowly die. Alongside her, the audience experienced an uncomfortable acoustic haze of exhausting piano sounds and alarming voices – anticipating her funeral lamentations. This is how the pressure of circumstances was physically transmitted to the psyche of Romeo's young wife – and the audience alike. She saw her fiancé, Paris, as a zombie with frightening gestures and intonation, his face a frozen mask. As the only 'living' person among the 'dead' corpses of this post-apocalypse, Juliet perceived Friar Lawrence as a last hope.

Having overcome another stereotype – the age and status of the actor in this role – Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi assigned the Friar's part to the leading actor of the company, the thirty-five-year-old Oleksii Hnatkovskyi. In part one, Friar Lawrence is entirely perceived as an alternative, an anarchist, a representative of the same subculture to which Mercutio and other happy-go-lucky fellows belong. Not so much a Catholic friar as a pagan, a shaman in a state of hallucination under the influence of drugs, this Friar Lawrence was a contrarian in form, yet an essential Free Spirit of the Renaissance era. In the second part, Oleksii Hnatkovskyi's Friar changed dramatically. The tragedy of the separated Romeo and Juliet sobered up Friar Lawrence. Emphatically correct, he got it all together in part 2, dressed and kempt under modern standards of business style. Instead of a pagan shaman, he was a civilised lawyer, an advocate for two children from enemy clans, whom he married.

From 2022, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine affected all aspects of the life of Ukrainians: from the moral and psychological condition to value priorities, from everyday life to self-identification. Naturally, art in general and theatre in particular have become both a living memory as far as media are concerned. They also represent instruments of changes happening to Ukrainians here and now. One of the interesting phenomena of theatrical life in today's Ukraine is the development of a semantic range of productions which premiered before the Russian full-scale invasion and have continued their runs after February 2022. Certain transformations occurred in terms of the theatre functioning as a cultural institution during the war.

Meeting with new existential challenges led theatres to expand their functional range, enhancing their meaning-generating potential, and their therapeutic role in the catastrophic climate of war. Since February 2022, in the context of the full-scale war in Ukraine, Derzhypilskyi was forced to abandon the, now dangerous, logistics of street theatre. His *Romeo & Juliet* lost its innovative mid-performance change of location and has been staged in its entirety in the theatre basement which now also doubles as a designated air-raid shelter in the city centre.

Compared to the production's 2021 vision, the enforced version of *Romeo & Juliet* after February 2022 may appear as an artistic compromise. Little remained of the original idea of the interactive and immersive first part of the tragedy within the space of PromPrylad Plant in the second version of this production, limited by the space in which it is performed. The atmosphere of a crypt on the stage in the basement, into which the spectators descended after seeing Juliet on her last journey – from the plant and through the city, was created by motionless monks, also portrayed by actors who, mystically depersonalised by hooded cloaks, guarded the space and guided spectators through the makeshift auditorium.

The production, which premiered in 2021, continued to be performed under the conditions of the full-scale Russian invasion and war in Ukraine. The fact that the audience of *Romeo & Juliet* now includes both internally displaced persons from combat zones, local volunteers, and wounded servicemen, has sharpened the significance and perception of the theme embedded in the performance from the premiere: the clashes of clans, a war which can only be stopped by the sacrifice of Ukrainian children, who are suffering but somehow portrayed as truer and better than their parents' generation.

During the years of its performance, there have been no changes among the performers, with the exception of Mariia Stopnyk, who joined the performance as one of the Erinyes. At the same time, it is difficult not to take into account that with its age and the experience of life and losses during the war, the cast began to perform Shakespeare's play with a greater sense of the tragic genre. The final word in the performance belongs to Lorenzo (Hnatkovskyi's Friar Lawrence): he pronounces the word 'peace', so coveted by all Ukrainians, not in a major key, but painfully, with fatigue and a sense of the weight of losses.

Unlike previous productions of *Romeo and Juliet* in Ukraine, Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi's version has already crossed the border of the country in which it was first staged. Thanks to the invitation of this *Romeo & Juliet* in the programme of the 14th Craiova International Shakespeare Festival in May 2024 in Romania ("Romeo and Juliet – directed by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi – Ukraine" 26 May 2024), the inclusion of the Shakespearean duology in the 1st Ivano Frankivsk International Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival (Ukraine, 17–23 June 2024), and the 28th Gdansk International Shakespeare Festival (Poland, 25 July–4 August 2024), this adaptation has already become one of the few performances in the history of Ukrainian Shakespeare

whose form and substance have been recognised at an international level. As noted in the material about the festival on the Polish Radio portal, the Festival director, Agata Grenda, who also heads the Shakespeare Theatre in Gdańsk, has said that “the highlights this year include a production of *Romeo and Juliet* staged by the National Academic Music and Drama Theatre in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine” (“Shakespeare Festival in Poland’s Gdańsk”). Such a high assessment of the Ukrainian version of Shakespeare’s tragedy is important, since the festival that year included performances of theatrical productions based on Shakespeare’s works from Poland, the United Kingdom, Italy, Croatia, Romania, and Peru. Ewa Bal’s review of the Ivano-Frankivsk Festival offered a particularly poignant insight into the staging of *Romeo and Juliet* in wartime Ukraine, as seen through the eyes of a Polish theatre scholar:

However, in Derzhypilskyi’s 2021 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, the masculinist world returns with redoubled force as fate’s imperative. In the opening scenes, the boys of the Montagues and Capulet families flex their muscles in a substandard gym [...]. The budding affection between Juliet and Romeo is thus an unfortunate misstep in a culture dripping with sweat and testosterone. Defending the family honour and being ready to lose one’s life in a fight are elevated to issues of prime importance. Derzhypilskyi is not quarrelling with this patriarchal model of the world; as I read his production, he identifies with it, sidelining the female perspective. These two plays, thus, stand in stark contrast to the widespread feminist critique of Shakespeare in Western culture, especially the pacifist interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*. I do not, however, see it as an interpretive anachronism but, rather, as a sign of the time and place where the play is being staged. (Bal)

To sum up, we can say that before the restoration of Ukraine’s independence in 1991, there were three types of productions of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in the Ukrainian theatre. The first historically distinguished tendency was to choose this work for benefit performances of leading actresses of Russian enterprises in Ukraine. In our study, we clarified the authorship of the director of the first production of the tragedy in N.N. Solovtsov’s Theatre in Kyiv and introduced into scholarly discourse information about the first two productions and performers of the character of Juliet in Kharkiv theatres in the private enterprise of Aleksandra Diukova and Ivan Tohobochnyi.

The second and third trends are related to the Soviet period of development of Ukrainian culture and are represented by Ukrainian-language productions of *Romeo and Juliet* in theatres for young audiences from the late 1930s to the mid-1960s, as well as by the embodiment of this play in the traditions of provincial Ukrainian musical and drama theatres. The study revealed that the main state-owned Ukrainian-language drama theatres in Ukraine consistently bypassed this Shakespeare tragedy, staging other dramas at that time.

A new milestone in the play's stage history has been reached since the 1990s. Ukrainian drama theatres have consistently turned to it. The first half of the 2000s was marked by the peak of interest in Ukrainian theatres (mainly in the capital) in *Romeo and Juliet*. It was the period when the first attempts to actualise the tragedy were made due to direct similarities with our time (Oleksii Lisovets) and even a shocking interpretation of post-dramatic theatre (Andrii Zholdak).

Derzhypil'skyi's interpretation of *Romeo & Juliet* could be described as a new step in the stage history of the play in the Ukrainian language and in Ukraine due to it belonging to a conceptual duology alongside Derzhypil'skyi's *HAMLET. Neo Horror Opera*. The peculiarity of the director's interpretation of both tragedies was the hybridisation of drama and opera, the combination of aggressive textures of music with high opera vocabulary, and the anti-poetic contemporary language of Andrukhovych's translation of Shakespeare's play with quotes from the *Revelation of St. John the Evangelist*. This intensified the contrasting struggle of Shakespeare's themes of harmony within the universe, found in love, and, in contrast, the struggle with fate and death. The spatial solution of this performance, with its duality of the world of the dead and that of the living, also enhanced Derzhypil'skyi's post-apocalyptic approach of Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*.

The experimental nature of the performance was reflected in the director's cuts and additions, in the unconventional interpretation of certain images, scenes, and collisions, and most notably in the use of space. As a result of the outbreak of a full-scale war, the play was edited. Its original concept and implementation as an immersive production, with interactive actions by actors alongside the audience (for the first time in the history of Ukrainian theatrical Shakespearean performances in three locations: an abandoned Soviet factory, Ivano-Frankivsk street, and a stage in the basement of the theatre), was replaced by a performance of the entire play on stage in the basement, now primarily serving as an air-raid shelter: In fact, the theatre basement served simultaneously as the air-raid shelter, offering relative safety during missile attacks on the city, and as a combination of stage and auditorium, aligning conceptually and topographically with the director's vision of the production as post-apocalyptic theatre. Rostyslav Derzhypil'skyi's production of *Romeo & Juliet* is the only one in over a century of Ukrainian theatrical history that was performed before a discerning audience at three international Shakespeare theatre festivals in Ivano-Frankivsk (Ukraine), Craiova (Romania), and Gdansk (Poland), and it was well received by the community of Shakespearean scholars. The Frankivsk Drama Theatre's production of *Romeo & Juliet*, unlike any other in Ukraine, embodies the contrasts of light and darkness, Eros and Thanatos, and, overall, the tragedy of the era in which it was staged. In contrast to, for example, the first Ukrainian-language production of *Romeo and Juliet* during Stalinist repressions, which could not reflect the horrific truth about the collapse of democratic values during that dictatorship.

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