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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Soviet Ghosts: The Former Theater of the Soviet Army in Lviv and Post-Socialism as a Crisis of Infrastructure

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Abstract

The author argues that one of the central crises of post-socialist culture is that of infrastructure: specifically, the categories of state and public, and how those are understood in relation to funding and managing the arts. War in Donbas has created a situation of scarcity and opportunity, creating small openings for changes in theatrical policy at the government level and changes in management at the local level. The article offers several examples of theaters resulting from or responding to changes in theatrical infrastructure, and uses the case study of Teatr Lesi, the former Soviet Army theater in Lviv, to demonstrate the fundamental transformation of theatrical infrastructure in Ukraine since 2014.

Keywords: Ukraine; theater; de-communization; war; Lviv

> *"Well, we understood, that there is this … myth about an evil spirit, or not an evil one, in this theater … about a curse, about the contamination of this area, of this place in general, so this is a cleansing, well, an exorcism, an expulsion of this evil demon. The evil demon is whatever you want, he is probably not in the walls and not in the air, and not in the theater, but in the people sitting there."*
>
> – Pavlo Arie, theater director (Otrishchenko 2016)[1]

Operation Exorcism

In March 2016, on the International Day of Theater, director Pavlo Arie created a pop-up performance at Teatr Lesi in Lviv, Ukraine. The show was called *Dukh teatru: operatsiia "Ekzortsyzm"* (Spirit of the Theater: Operation Exorcism). Performed in the cavernous theater to a select house of intimates, friends, and colleagues, all sitting with the actors on the stage, the work was intended to exorcise the "evil spirit" from the company corridors (Slipchenko 2016). Or perhaps, as director Arie suggested in an interview by Kateryna Slipchenko, from the audience members themselves. To be sure, this theater had a history worthy of exorcism: formerly it was the theater of the Carpathian Military District [PrykVO, for Prykarpats'kyi vis'kovyi okruh, in Ukrainian; Prikarpatskii voennyi okrug, in Russian] (Davydova 1975); the theater of the Ukrainian Army; the theater of the Western Operational Command (Romanovs'kyi 2005); the Lviv Municipal Theater; and now the Lviv Dramatic Theater, named after Lesia Ukrainka, or Teatr Lesi. The city's former Russian-language Soviet Army Theater is now a Ukrainian-language theater for hip Lviv youth.

The "exorcism" was a one-off performance, meant never to be seen again, in the genre of documentary theater. This method involves making a performance piece from theatrical and

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nontheatrical texts in a way that is composed, but not fixed. Actors often improvise on choreographed themes and often interact with the audience (Prokhorova and Shamina 2014; Lipovetsky and Beumers 2003). This particular doc theater pop-up comprised a series of monologues by four generations of theater artists – from the PrykVO days, the post-military city theater days, and those hired in recent years by the two previous artistic directors. Actors made references to diva Zinaida Dekhtiareva (1927–2004), who, when she quit the company in 1994, having been put on a half-salary, cursed the theater. Or so legend has it (Vergelis 2012). Certain scenes, such as a séance calling forth the Evil Demon, were planned and rehearsed; other scenes, such as an impromptu monologue-testimony given by an older actress, were utterly unplanned. Yet in telling their stories, the actors of four generations both narrated and created ties between each other, and actors and audience seem to have ended the evening in tears of catharsis.[2]

Spirit of the Theater: Operation "Exorcism" was a strange theatrical experiment to be sure, but one that raises questions about the nature of the evil demon requiring such extreme measures. In fact, the production, its players, and the theater company and building itself suggest that what was exorcised was the Soviet theatrical infrastructure.

Post-socialist Theater and the Crisis of Infrastructure

One of the central crises of post-socialist culture is how to transform infrastructure. The arteries connecting the state, audience, and artists that were so fundamental to the Soviet regime remained long after political collapse. Even though the Ministry of Culture of the Ukrainian state, for example, ceased its monopoly over the arts, expectations remained that the state would and should fund the arts. Huge theater buildings covered Ukraine, and local audiences were accustomed to attending the theater and enjoying a rotating repertory. Artists depended on *zvannia*, titles such as "People's Artist," which meant higher salaries, and they continued to expect that the state, not private individuals, would fund their work. Individual oligarchs stepped in for financial patronage, in some cases, but always with agendas (Chuzhynova 2015; Pesenti 2020).

The built environment, the funding for theater, and the relationship between society, the state, and artists required a seismic shift after the collapse of the state monopoly on the arts. Kimberly Zarecor (2018, 97–98) argues that "infrastructural thinking" shaped the building of socialist cities, since housing, work, and the state were all conceived as part of one entity. This "socialist scaffold," as she calls it (98), remained after collapse. I would argue the same "scaffold" existed in the arts, since buildings, artist unions, party cells, and social engineering and entertainment were all connected as part of creating and maintaining socialist culture – that is, the socialist worldview and networks of meaning. The challenge over the last two decades, therefore, has been not only to dismantle the "scaffold" and build new infrastructures but also to foster new attitudes toward those connections between the state, the arts, and society. This crisis of infrastructure is particularly visible in the old behemoth state theaters dotting the cityscapes of the former USSR. Teatr Lesi, for example, was falling apart due to lack of state financial involvement; one reason the performance took place on the stage itself was the impossibility of heating the theater on a grand scale and fixing the roof, through which snow and rain fell throughout the winter. Standing on the stage one could quite literally look up and see the sky. If the state does not support the arts, who should?

Indeed, in its funding and creation *Spirit of the Theater: Operation "Exorcism"* represented a move away from the Soviet infrastructure. This particular performance was part of a residency partnership between the theater, several local theatrical institutions, and the East European Performing Arts Platform, whose support facilitated the project. *Spirit of the Theater: Operation "Exorcism"* was a product of foreign and local monies, resulted from interdisciplinary exploration, and was not intended to become part of any repertory. Historian Oksana Dudko brought together research, Polish curator Joanna Wichowska managed the residency, and director Arie worked with all the actors in long sessions to create theatrical content (Otrishchenko 2016; Dudko 2016).

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Creating a new, non-Soviet relationship between the money and the muse requires exorcising the Soviet ghosts.

The Crisis of Infrastructure: From State to Public

This crisis of infrastructure lies in the general understanding of which institutions should fund theater, how theaters should be managed, and to whom artists should be accountable. At the heart of this crisis is a question over to whom theater belongs: the state or the public. Ultimately, the crisis in post-socialist culture involves, in part, moving from a state-dominated model to one more inclusive of the public and envisioning the public not as an object for education or engineering, but as an agent, a financial and artistic stakeholder in the artistic landscape. The Soviet cultural infrastructure involved a full state monopoly over the arts, with top-down management, heavy subsidies that had little to do with profit or loss, and state-organized audiences. Moreover, the very concept of the theater "public" was tricky, since single-ticket sales were not a crucial factor in theater solvency. Audiences were largely organized by the Office of Organizing the Spectators (Biuro po organizatsii zritelei in Russian; Biuro z orhanizatsyi hliadacha in Ukrainian), whose workers sold and distributed chunks of tickets as they saw fit to local institutions, such as schools or factories. In the Soviet period theater outside the state was almost impossible to create (Otrishchenko 2013).

At first glance, the collapse of a state monopoly over the arts might seem to offer a flourishing of post-censorship opportunities, an ability for artists to speak their truth in a way previously not possible. In fact, however, Soviet artists, with guaranteed audiences and salaries, were protected from the market; the transition away from state monopoly posed unexpected challenges not only financial, but also artistic. Some of these challenges lay in the lack of clarity over the public. For years the public had been organized, managed, and shaped by the state, but a public-centered model for the arts presupposes a different relationship: the state as a partner facilitating cultural production through allocation of taxes and grant monies, not a gatekeeper to cultural products or promoter of propaganda. Moreover, theater artists now had to grapple with the reality of the market, and found themselves more dependent on the audience than they were accustomed to in the Soviet period.

This crisis resulting from the collapse of state monopoly resounded across the socialist bloc and Soviet Union. Marilyn Rueschemeyer (2005, 135–137) shows that the collapse of communism in East Germany shocked artists; suddenly exposed to the market and the whim of public taste, they struggled to find their voice. David Hughes (2007, 149) argues that theaters in East Germany nearly twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall still oriented themselves toward the state as opposed to the general public; protests at Berlin's Volksbuehne Theater reveal how the question of "whose theater?" is still relevant today. The activist protesters in 2018 felt that the theater – the "people's stage," quite literally – had a mission to fulfill as a beacon of social justice, not as a gentrified hub for international performing arts collaborations that might have nothing to do with the concerns of those who considered themselves the theater's "public," even if these new projects brought profit and international acclaim to the storied stage (DW 2018). Lev Jakobson, Boris Rudnik, and Stefan Toepler (2018) demonstrate that the Russian public failed to materialize as a funder for theater in post-Soviet Russia, so the Kremlin stepped back in as the primary financial patron of the arts – with consequences for cultural production, of course. A 2017 issue of *Polish Theater Journal* includes a forum, "The Curse: Who Does Public Theater Belong To?"; the title refers to Oliver Frjlic's production of *Kłątwa* (The Curse), a scandalous and protest-provoking anti-Catholic play, at Warsaw's state-funded Teatr Powszechny, or "Public" Theater (Adamiecka-Sitek and Keil 2017). Put simply, whose is the public theater, and does a pro-Catholic audience have a voice? There are still more than 113 theaters in Ukraine funded at the state and local level, and there are more than a hundred independent groups in Kyiv alone (Roi 2019; Burnashov 2016, 2018; Derzhavna sluzhba statystyky Ukrainy 2017).[3] The Soviet state spent a sizeable chunk of cash on theater; the post-Soviet state does not. So what of the arts, out from under state monopoly? Who should fund these 113 theaters, not to mention the independents, and to whom do they belong? What role should the

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6.2 million people who saw shows at state theaters play in the production of art? (Derzhavna sluzhba statystyky Ukrainy 2017).

Lurking behind these questions is not only the challenge of moving from a state-centered to a public-centered cultural infrastructure, but also the very relationship between the state and the public itself. In his exploration of the changing fortunes of the theater, Christopher Balme argues that the power of the "theatrical public sphere" in the 21st century lies precisely outside the theater – that is, in the theater's ability to draw in a larger public than simply the several-hundred audience members who buy tickets to a certain performance (through, for example, social media, mass productions, virtual spaces) (Balme 2014, 42–46). Balme shows how theater can indeed be a truly public sphere in the Habermasian sense, creating a place of discourse and debate apart from the state, by re-thinking the nature of theater itself. But Balme's argument is challenging to apply to post-socialist and post-Soviet spaces because he operates on a Western European dichotomy between public and private institutions. In Western Europe, "public" is conflated with "state" – that is, these are institutions connected to the public financially (funded by public monies from taxes, for example), and socially (funded by the state to make them accessible to the general population). These state/public institutions are therefore not "private," funded by private individuals or entities. State institutions are for the public.

Yet this conflation of the categories of public and state becomes confused in an Eastern European context, where the dichotomy is more often presented as state vs. independent, that is, those institutions funded by the state, and those institutions operating outside state support. The assumption is that "state" theaters, although they may be funded in part through public income tax revenue, are not "independent" of state demands and therefore not as artistically authentic. In this context, however, the focus is on the state, whether the theater is part of the state or apart from the state. Lost in this dichotomy between "state" and "independent" is the notion of public.

Ekaterina Pravilova (2014) explains that in the Russian Empire, liberals believed that experts could represent the public in managing "public things" (that is, institutions such as forests or heritage), with the administrative backing of the state (16). Yet "in the Soviet state the experts were put in a position that obliged them to represent the state, to register, count, and study 'public things' for state needs" (Pravilova 2014, 285). The focus of state institutions, then, was not the public, but the state itself. The crisis in post-Soviet infrastructure, then, involves retooling the money and the muse to include the public as a source of revenue and, more importantly, as a stakeholder in theatrical production.

Despite complaints over the decline in audience numbers, the audience is still a force in Ukraine. Statistics from 2017 show that theater attendance declined from 17.6 million in 1990 to 6.2 million in 2017 (Derzhavna sluzhba statystyky Ukrainy 2017). Yet with a population of 44 million, that still means that about 14 percent of the total population attends the theater. For a comparison, consider the United States. A 2019 report by the National Endowment for the Arts showed that 9 percent of the US adults attended a "non-musical performance," which could also include student or community (amateur) performances (National Endowment for the Arts 2017, 95. The Ukrainian statistics, by contrast, are only for professional theater (and do not include the Donbas region). Moreover, in 1990, the audience was still organized, so one has to wonder how many of those audience members were simply attending the theater because of a mandatory *profsoiuz* outing. In short, Ukraine still has an audience, but the relationship between this public, the state, and artists is changing.

War and Cultural Infrastructure

A new generation of artists, new government policies passed in 2015, and new funding paradigms are shifting theater away from the state and toward the public. Because many of these transformations in cultural infrastructure have happened since 2013, the natural question is to what degree Maidan, Crimea, and war in Donbas have shaped theatrical production and reception

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(Dudko 2017; Veselovs′ka 2016). War has changed institutional frameworks for cultural production and reception: what is performed, for whom, funded how, and in what spaces.

This question of how war shapes culture is knotty because it involves causality, working out to what extent a social or political event "caused" cultural production. My argument is that while it is clear that war caused content in theatrical productions, the more consequential changes are infrastructural. Importantly, the wartime moment has created challenges, and therefore opportunities for artists to find unanticipated solutions to the crisis of post-socialist infrastructure, and ultimately, for the public to become a more important agent in cultural production. While perhaps less visible than the content created in response to the war, these infrastructural shifts show a major transformation of the cultural landscape in Ukraine.

War and Theatrical Content

The question of how artists dream up the content of cultural production (the image, the sound, the plot) may differ from the question of how current events shape funding possibilities, audience attendance, or theater management. But tracking content yields one direct way to show that war in Donbas is indeed shaping theater in Ukraine, as it is shaping the entirety of cultural production in Ukraine. Indeed, music, literature, and film all show new works and new people creating a body of cultural production that will merit further cultural analysis. I offer three examples from the independent theater scene before returning to state theaters. The first is the Teatr pereselentsia, or Theater of Displaced People, which began with a 2015 "documentary" style project of people narrating their own experiences of war. The content of the productions comes from the experience of internally displaced persons creating new lives after leaving their homes and sharing that experience with a Kyiv audience (Gordienko 2017; Sopova 2018). The second example is PostPlay Theater, which had a production in repertory from 2015 called *Opolchentsi* (Militiamen), a solo performance based on a conversation with a separatist from Donetsk. The director was Anton Romanov and the actress was Halyna Dzhykaieva, both pro-Ukrainian Crimeans now living and working for the foreseeable future in Kyiv (Volkovs′kyi 2016; Tiahlo 2016).[4] This production, as artistic director Den Gumennyi explained at the satellite meeting of the Informal European Theatre Meeting (known as IETM) in Kyiv in June 2018, is about the conversation after the play around Donbas and war, as much as it is about the quality of the theatrical performance itself (Fowler and Zychowicz 2018, 8–9). War is creating new content, new stories for the stage, and the line between the experience of war and these theatrical productions (among others) is clear.

Yet new content can also come from war in Donbas in a way that may be less direct, as in my third example, Wild Theater's 2017 production of *Zoo (Performance-Promenade)*, based on the Edward Albee 1957 play *Zoo Story*. The play's "stage" is the Kyiv zoo, as audience members follow the two actors and observe, and ultimately interact with, their relationship as it unfolds over the hour-long tour of the zoo. The play asks, "How are you different from animals? And are you different?" (Wild Theatre 2017). The production ultimately demands that audience members confront their own response to violence and consider to what degree they will take responsibility for violence happening around them. These questions have ostensibly nothing to do with war (it is, after all, an Edward Albee play, written in 1958), and yet everything to do with the war and consequent challenges in Ukrainian society today. While not as clearly influenced by Donbas as is the Theater of Displaced People or a monologue about separatists, these artists are responding to the world around them and telling new stories.

War and Theatrical Infrastructure

Yet a different lens highlights the causal relationship between war and the arts more effectively; it is precisely this hermeneutics of infrastructure that may explain how the new challenges created by war demand a different theatrical infrastructure, how projects fit into a nexus of funding, space, and

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policy. In the previous examples: these projects, among others, are not in the state theater infrastructure. The growth of such independent projects is notable since 2013, in fact. The Theater of Displaced People is a non-state theater initiative; most of its funding comes from foreign grants, and it operates "outside" the traditional theater spaces and funding lines for most theaters in Kyiv. "Despite its stature as one of the brightest initiatives on the Ukrainian cultural scene," writes Alisa Sopova (2018), "the Theater is not financially self-sufficient and does not have its own premises." PostPlay Theater and Wild Theater are also independent companies, performing in various locations throughout the city depending on (and competing for) various pots of funding.

Wild Theater was one of several independent or quasi-independent theaters featured at Days of Contemporary Ukrainian Theater, a showcase of representative productions connected with the 2018 IETM satellite meeting in Kyiv (IETM 2018). In other words, Ukraine was producing enough independent theater to catch the attention of a European network of independent theaters. Yet the theatrical performances took place at the Dovzhenko Center, a state institution that now has a space specifically for independent theater called Scene 6. Scene 6, then, is part of a state institution but working with non-state independent actors to produce theater and working to find a niche in a rich independent theater scene. The IETM conference itself took place in the "Upper Floor," the theatrical space located in Mystets'kyi Arsenal, or Art Arsenal, a state institution for visual arts. In other words, much of the content of independent theater projects references and grows from the war in the east. Yet even more consequential seems to be the changes in infrastructure that these projects necessitate, and from which these projects benefit, a growth of new spaces for theater, and new relationships between independent and state institutions.

A New Public?

These projects show how the public is involved in new ways. First, these theatrical performances brought in people who may not be involved in theater previously. Theater of Displaced People brings non-actors to the stage and non-Kyivans to a theater space in Kyiv as performers and as audience members. It has developed, too, beyond one theatrical project in one space to a cluster of projects on screen, in nontheatrical and theatrical spaces across the county, aiming to bring the world of displaced people to the greater society. In fact, one of its latest projects is Class Act, a project spearheaded by playwright Natalia Vorozhbyt in which twenty children from the frontlines in the east to troubled cities in the west are brought together in Kyiv. They write plays in pairs, and those plays are then staged by professional directors, with professional actors, from all over the country. The project, as Anna Korzeniowska-Bihun and Robert Boroch argue, is a form of combating stereotypes for the next generation, because they learn to work with "different" people (2017, 126). Class Act inspired Lviv artists Roza Sarkisian and Andriy Bondarenko to create a local version, DramaTeen, in 2019; with city funding, they created a workshop for Lviv teenagers that resulted in a performance showing the audience the stories that were important to Lviv youth: friends, transportation, dreams, the past. Lviv teenagers became part of the theatrical public in a way that they may not have been, and the Lviv theater audience expanded its expectations because of these short plays (Varianty 2019). These projects perfectly illustrate Balme's notion of a theatrical public sphere in the 21st century.

War has caused artistic and technical personnel to leave the mammoth theater in Donetsk and the theater in Luhansk, as well as those in Crimea. This creates mobility: artists and technical personnel working at theaters they would never have worked at previously. Anton Romanov and Halyna Dzhykaieva, for example, would never have left Simeropol and might never have tried to provoke Kyiv audiences to talk about current events had war not happened. The focus of their work is on the public, not on the state.

As Wild Theater producer Yaroslava Kravchenko noted at the IETM conference, the company's production *Zoo* aimed specifically to draw in the public in new ways (Fowler and Zychowicz 2018, 9). Aside from taking place in a zoo, where unsuspecting zoo tourists might happen upon, even

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respond to, the theatrical event, the production's ending put the public front and center. The show ends with one of the actors "killing" the other in an abandoned structure at the edge of the zoo. The actor pretends to be dead for long enough to make the audience uncomfortable: should they call for help? Do they leave the unmoving actor? *Did something really happen?* Do they try to move the actor? Do they perform CPR on him? The public becomes part of the theatrical event. In other words, new concepts of the "public" are growing; new publics in the audience, new publics on stage, theater that transparently and consciously reaches out to include the greater public: truly post-Soviet theater.

Whether one believes that theater can create a public sphere and serve as an agent of change, it is certainly true that these independent theater projects show how new people can tell new stories in new spaces drawing in new publics. In their funding, audiences, and agenda these projects demonstrate a move away from the post-Soviet (Veselovs′ka 2016) to a new theatrical infrastructure in Ukraine.

Formerly State-Run Culture for the Public?

But what about state theaters, those exemplars of the Soviet theatrical infrastructure? Of course, they are also responding to war. In 2019, Tamara Trunova directed Natalia Vorozhbyt's *Pohani dorohy* (Bad Roads) at the Theater of Drama and Comedy on the Left Bank of the Dnipro (Teatr dramy i komedii na livomu berezi Dnipra). The play, six stories about the war, premiered at the Royal Court Theater in London, a pared-down black-box production explaining Ukraine to a Western audience; the Kyiv production, of course, involved a state theater working with contemporary material with a full cast and directorial concept that won the Best Drama prize at the second annual theater festival Hra (Play) (Billington 2017; Teatr dramy i komedii 2020). But other state theaters, such as Teatr Lesi, show a more complicated picture of the legacy of a state-run theater when the state does not want it. In Teatr Lesi we can see how a state theater becomes a public theater, through concrete changes in the policies shaping the theatrical infrastructure.

Consider the background of the Theater of the Carpathian Military District, the institutional forerunner of Teatr Lesi. This state military theater was the quintessential representative of the Soviet theatrical infrastructure, and its peregrinations follow those of Soviet culture in general. The company was founded in 1931 as the Theater of the Kyiv Military District, became a frontline troupe during World War II and ended up as the theater of the Odesa Military District from 1944. In 1954, the company was moved to Lviv. It was the only Russian-language theater in the city (Davydova 1975; Zakharov 1981).

The company was funded not by the Ministry of Culture, but by the Ministry of Defense. That the Ministry of Defense of the USSR funded military theaters in seven out of sixteen military districts demonstrates the importance of theater, of defense, and of theater as defense in the USSR, of course. The theater was able to flourish, performing Soviet plays for Soviet military and urban audiences, supported by the Soviet institutional networks centered in Moscow and extending to the small towns throughout the district in which they performed. In short, military theaters were poster children for the Soviet cultural infrastructure.

But that all collapsed. The theater immediately switched hands to the Ukrainian Army in 1991 as soon as the USSR imploded, but the Ukrainian Armed Forces did not want a theater. The company continued, however, struggling under the lack of interest by the new state and new military and attempting to stage a few shows in Ukrainian – difficult for actors whose entire professional careers had unfolded on stage in Russian. Those remaining in the company ultimately pushed a Russian-language line, arguing that they could remain the theater serving the Russian-language minority in Lviv, doing the old plays they had done so well. Yet while all theaters were left adrift by a lack of state interest, this theater was particularly so. In 2006, the Army officially divested itself of the theater and various plans were afoot to take it over – first the Ministry of Culture was going to take over the company and combine it with another theater in Lviv, such as the Les Kurbas theater or the Maria

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Zankovetska theater, and then sell the building and the land on which it stood. The actors went on a hunger strike to protest (Romanovs′kyi 2005 Kozyreva 2008).

Because of the hunger strike, or at least influenced by it, the Ministry of Culture did take over the theater, but put it in the bailiwick of the city administration, so the company became the Lviv Municipal Theater, just one more Ukrainian-language theater in the city of Lviv. And so it has remained, through its various name changes, ending up now as Teatr Lesi, on the budget of the city. The theater then moved from a *derzhavnyi* status (state theater) and became *komunal′nyi* (communal), funded and regulated by the *mis′ka rada* (local city council). For years, it struggled to find its audience and its niche in a city with several popular theater houses.

Dependent on state funding (and even more particularly the funding from a defunct institution, the Soviet Army), unable to organize its own audiences, and unsure about what stories to tell, the former Theater of the Soviet Army highlights the crisis of infrastructure of post-socialism. The challenges of Ukrainian state and society – lack of resources, corruption, failed governance – were the very same challenges in the theater.

Theater Mirroring Society

Maria Shevtsova (2004) writes of theater as a truly social institution, one that is deeply imbricated in society and through which society reveals itself. Analyze the theater, and one finds society. This observation is particularly pertinent in the case of Teatr Lesi, whose changing fortunes parallel those of the Ukrainian state, through revolutions, war, and changing political visions. The ultimate relic of the Soviet cultural infrastructure may offer a mirror on this infrastructural transformation (Otrishchenko, Shvydko, Antoniuk 2016).

In the post-Orange Revolution era of disillusion with Viktor Yushchenko and the election of Viktor Yanukovych, the theater struggled to find its footing in Lviv. Playwright and director Pavlo Arie entered the scene in 2011 with his play *Kolory* (Colors), about women in Ukraine from World War II to the present, directed by Oleksii Kravchuk. Kravchuk was connected to the theater because his parents had been leading actors; Arie was a Lviv native and rising star playwright; PrykVO leading actress Zhanna Tuhai, still working at the theater, had a lead role: perhaps this production, an Ukrainian-language play about the experience of women in Ukraine, could have saved the theater. But the play did not. Arie later said in an interview that there were severe tensions among the artists in the show, between the older generation and the younger one, who had come with then-artistic director Liudmyla Kolosovych. The sets were mysteriously burned and destroyed. The production was effectively ruined. Based on this experience, Arie wrote a play called *Liudyna v pidvyshennomu stani* (A Person in a Hanging Position), about the backstage drama of the theater, that is still performed in Teatr Lesi's repertory (Drymalovs′kyi 2016). With no money, no resources, and artistic tension, the theater was headed for closing. This relic of the Soviet cultural infrastructure was hanging on by a thread. A former state theater looking for its public?

Around the time of the Russian seizure of Crimea, in March 2014, the Lviv City Council hired provocative bad-boy director Oleksii Kolomiitsev, presumably in order to bring a vision and lure an audience to the theater (Vergelis 2014). While he brought some radical works – and good actors – to the company, his dictatorial ways alienated administrative, technical, and artistic personnel. In 2015, actors rebelled, literally stopping a performance and refusing to perform under Kolomiitsev. The city fired him. In fact, much of the tension between actors brought to the company by Kolosovych and actors arriving later under Kolomiitsev was material for *Spirit of the Theater: Operation "Exorcism"*. Arie soon came back to run the theater, but he did not last there long; a new team, largely made up of young women, has been running the theater since fall 2017, and Dmytro Zakhozhenko was hired as main director in 2019.

The revolving cast of directors, the backstage scandals, acts of destruction, and ghosts that require exorcism speak to the theater's lack of connection with the public. In fact, in an audit conducted by the Ministry of Culture and Lviv City Council, investigators noted the painfully low

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number of audience members. In 2016, the average attendance was 83 spectators, or 18 percent of the seats. The report also noted a lack of publicity, too many new productions that did not resonate with the public, and the ruinous state of the building, which meant that it was physically painful to attend the theater in winter (Derzhavna audytors′ka sluzhba Ukraïny 2017). This was a "public" theater, a communal theater for the city that was not a part of the city, a public theater without a public. Perhaps, in fact, that is what *Spirit of the Theater: Operation "Exorcism"* was all about. Perhaps it was about exorcising the old theatrical infrastructure to find a public.

"My City Renovates My Theater"

While it may be impossible to say whether the political and social upheavals of Maidan, Crimea, and war changed actors' horizons such that toppling a theater dictator seemed possible and necessary, it seems clear that major political and social changes allowed for new solutions to infrastructural crisis. New stakeholders created opportunities for new publics, and artists have started to take advantage. During the Kolomiitsev era in 2014, as a project of the Lviv City Council with Teatr Lesi, the *mala stsena* (small stage) of the theater got a new life. The Persha stsena suchasnoi dramaturhii Drama.UA (First Stage of Contemporary Dramaturgy Drama.UA), a project started from the theater festival Drabyna curated by Oksana Dudko, moved into the small stage of the theater. From 2014, Drabyna, which ran a yearly theater festival of contemporary plays in Lviv from 2010 to 2013, had a permanent platform at Teatr Lesi to bring contemporary plays to the public (Dudko 2014). The project produced several interesting plays performed for the first time in Ukraine, such as *Burmistr/ Burmistrz* (The Mayor) (2011) by Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk, about local collaboration with the Nazi occupiers in World War II (Vyshnia 2015). Audiences packed the small theater, and the actors held discussions after the performances to talk about the historical themes raised by the play. The group's theme for its second season was *inshosti* (otherness), through which the group aimed to bring questions of "East-West, ours-theirs" to the Lviv public (Vyshnia 2015). Viktoria Shvydko (2018) explained that what Iryna Podolyak, who then worked at the Department of Culture at Lviv City Council, wanted was for the non-state social organization to work seamlessly with the state theater, showing that non-state and state institutions could work together productively. But because of tensions between the older Teatr Lesi administration and the younger activist team, this experiment failed. And what happened was that the non-state artists themselves became the new management of the state theater, thanks to new theater laws allowing for change.

Theater Laws

In late 2015, Iryna Podolyak, no longer head of the Culture Department of Lviv City Council but an MP, pushed through a package of legislation on theater, causing scandals throughout the theater world. Some argued that the new policies would destroy theater in Ukraine, others that they would save it (Nechet 2015; Dudko 2015). She explained in an interview that the package was voted in a brief "post-Maidan" moment, when such potentially tectonic policy changes were possible; later such legislation would have been impossible to push through Parliament (Podolyak 2018). This legislation is, and will continue to, force change in the theatrical infrastructure. War did not cause this legislation, but the revolutionary wartime moment created a space for new legislation to be passed, in a way that it simply could not have previously. These changes are particularly visible at Teatr Lesi.

The first change involved how theaters are managed. Previously, all theaters had an artistic director and a managing director. While this structure is similar to western companies, the position of managing director is in fact a legacy of the "red director" from the Soviet period, who took care of business aspects of theatrical production (that is, making sure companies were in line with party

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policy) as the artistic director ruled the house. Theaters were associated primarily with their artistic directors, who often stayed in their positions until death. The Podolyak legislation decreed that the two positions of managing director and artistic director would become one position. One person manages both administrative and artistic vision, with much directing and administration is delegated to a team. This erases the "red director" and means that theaters simply cannot be ruled by one artistic vision. The artistic director cannot direct all the shows; instead, there is a position of a *holovnyi/a rezhyser/ka* (main director) who is responsible for creating signature work. Artistically, then, theaters must include more input, influences, and negotiation.

Second, hiring of the new director-artistic director is no longer decided by appointment, but by open competition. Candidates submit dossiers and a jury of experts selects; open fora offer an opportunity to candidates to present themselves to the public. Finally, these appointments last not until death, but for five years. This radically increases the competition for running a theater and means that no longer will certain houses be forever associated with certain directors. Young artist Olha Puzhakovs'ka, who won the competition for the new position in 2017, is now artistic-managing director of the theater. Director Olena Apchel' was the main director until summer 2019, when Dmytro Zakhozhenko took over. Working with Puzhakovs'ka is a team of young people, including Oksana Danchyk and Victoria Shvydko, from the days of First Stage of Contemporary Dramaturgy Drama.UA (Perekhrest 2017).

The open competitions have meant a new generation entering into theater management, "new blood," in Podolyak's terms (2018). It is not yet clear how that will play out, but the presence of people in their thirties who were born almost after the collapse of communism running the former state theaters means that something will shift. Already Puzhakovs'ka, following on the work started by Pavlo Arie, has worked on the theater's branding – its website, social media, and connection with the audience – to draw younger people to the theater. She has been pushing for attention from the city and finally secured financial investment of 11 million hryvnia over the course of several years to renovate the roof and the walls. The new 2016 theater laws thus opened up opportunities for new people in positions of authority who are quite literally altering the infrastructure of the theater. An enormous construction sign hanging on the side of the theater building in 2018 declared for all passersby, "My city is renovating my theater." The city, the sign suggests, is not renovating its own theater, or a national theater, but "my" theater, the theater of those walking on Horodotska Street, the theater of those who attend productions, the theater of everyday Lviv citizens. The theater, then, belongs to the public (Chupryns′ka 2018).

New Funding

Legislation has also shaped the funding landscape. Of course, the state radically decreased support for theater in the 1990s, even for state theaters. Foreign organizations, such as the Polish Cultural Institute, the Goethe Institute, and, particularly in the world of contemporary theater, the British Council, have stepped in and offer financial support through various projects, such as British Council's Taking the Stage project, which funded thirteen productions (Pesenti 2020). Applying for these funding opportunities is now part of everyday practice at many theaters. But funding has changed in the Ukrainian state as well. In March 2017, the government signed a law creating the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation to increase accessibility to state funding. The foundation allows state and independent theaters alike to apply for funding in the same competition, which equalizes the access to resources more than in the past. Expert commissions then pick the projects that deserve funding, thus increasing transparency and making it harder for funding to go automatically to state theaters or to those with whom funders have personal connections. Grants require reports detailing budgets and assessments and outcomes. Theaters then need to look to their audiences – that is, the public – in order to show evidence of the positive effect of their grant on the public. Critics have pointed out hiccups in the legislation, but the policy of equalizing access to state funding for culture is a shift from the Soviet period and already seems to show results. Marina

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Pesenti describes the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation as part of a "new ecosystem of culture [that] helped to bridge the gap between state and independent cultural actors" (2020).[5]

Teatr Lesi is also benefiting from, and pushing, changes in funding. Because of the war, theaters, always underfunded, have been in dire circumstances. Under Arie, the theater began doing co-productions. Co-productions have started to appear throughout Ukraine as a way of handling a lack of state resources. Stas Zhirkov's 2016 production of Pavlo Arie's *Glory to the Heroes* performed at the Teatr Zoloti vorota in Kyiv and in Ivano-Frankivsk offers a productive example of such co-productions. Co-productions are often between various types of theater institutions. Once such example is *Tom at the Farm*, by Michel Mark Bouchard, a co-production with Teatr Lesi (a local theater, *komunalnyi*), Mystets'kyi Arsenal (a state museum in Kyiv, not a theater), and Wild Theater (not a state theater). These opportunities to working together have created new networks, showed actors to new audiences, and decentralized theater from Kyiv. This process has gone hand in hand with the larger process of political and economic decentralization, allocating more authority and resources to regions and cities to distribute. For Teatr Lesi in Lviv, with a city council invested in creating culture, this is a benefit (Levitas 2017). Decentralization also moves the theatrical landscape away from the hierarchy so typical of the Soviet period, when theaters were in competition with each other for resources, prizes, and coveted attention from the state, and when theaters in the capital city were assumed to be the best. New resource pathways mean that the old hierarchy does not function any longer.

A New Theater for a New Public?

What one sees in the Teatr Lesi is not theater removing itself from the state, but artists creating new ways of operating that are not entirely dependent on state engagement, including new pots of funding (the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, the city, other grants), new attempts to draw in the public, and a new investment in the building and the space in the city. Yet lest this analysis seem overly positive, the Soviet legacy still remains. Theaters need the status of "academic" in order to demonstrate their validity and quality and receive better salaries. On its website in 2017, Teatr Lesi proudly noted its new "academic" status, a strange Soviet marker (Teatr Lesi 2017). Similarly, critic Anna Lypkivs′ka (2018) noted the odd holdover of titles such as "people's artist" that should not exist now that the hierarchy in which they emerged is gone. As Podolyak noted, the salary levels for national (*natsional′nyi*) theaters (that is, those with the highest Ukrainian state subsidies, such as opera houses in major cities) continue to be decided by personal connections as opposed to standardized, transparent policy; such institutions should be "hubs" connecting with the greater public, and instead they covet their hryvnia from the state for themselves (Podolyak 2018). The "Podolyak" 2015 legislation has its own challenges; a contract system depends on artists and management playing by the rules – that is, the contract – and not cancelling contracts based on personal differences or grievances. The rules of the game are changing, but those changes are still in process.

The Imagination

As Hungarian writer Miklos Haraszti writes about artists under socialism, "I am interested not only in the outer regulations that restrain the artist but also – and primarily – the inner gravitation, the downward pull, of the artist's imagination" (Haraszti 1989, 110). This connection between regulations and a decreased imagination suggests a connection between infrastructure and creativity. Yet perhaps we could turn Haraszti around: bursts of imagination can transform outer regulations, or rather, the need to tell new stories might help create new structures in which to tell them. Indeed, war is shaping the horizons of imagination in Ukraine. Theatergoers can notice a shift in geography, away from Moscow (to paraphrase the 1926 rallying cry of Soviet Ukrainian cultural elite Mykola Khvyl'ovyi) and toward other theatrical centers, such as Warsaw or Berlin. Soviet

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Ukraine was "the regions" in the Soviet theatrical landscape, but that geography is changing. After Maidan, Russian theater artists took an interest in theater in Ukraine. Theater scholar Marina Davydova edited an issue of the Russian theater journal *Teatr* about Ukraine in 2014. It opens provocatively, "They asked me: Why do an issue about Ukraine? There's no good theater there. I answered: We want to find out what is there" (Davydova 2014). How absurd – and telling – that no one knew what was going on in Ukraine. The question now is to what extent theater artists in Ukraine care about what is going on in Russia.

Yet imagination is not only about stories but also about infrastructure in which those stories are told and heard: new artists are imagining new ways of making theater, new audiences, new sources of funding. New scarcities in state resources have remade the way the state funds culture and how artists look elsewhere for funding. While these changes were not directly caused by war, war shut down certain options such that the old Soviet infrastructure had to shift. These changes in infrastructure are tectonic, moving Ukraine away from Russia, away from the (post) Soviet and toward the challenges of 21st-century theater faced by artists elsewhere.

Finally, I return to *Spirit of the Theater: Operation "Exorcism."* The play focused on the scandals and secrets of one theater's history, a rich one at that, and seemed to be an important step in the artists of the theater moving forwards to leave that past behind them. Yet, intriguingly, Arie suggested in his interview that the evil demon might not be exclusively in the walls of the theater, but rather "in the people sitting there." People, his words suggest, made infrastructure; presumably, then, people can craft new infrastructures to un-make the Soviet ghosts. The people at the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, at city councils across Ukraine, at theaters such as Teatr Lesi, and those eagerly awaiting the next show are all part of the process of creating a new cultural infrastructure. In fact, Teatr Lesi now describes themselves not as a theater but "a contemporary artistic platform and a young active team, which is fighting with stereotypes and ghosts of the past and creating new Ukrainian theater" (Teatr Lesi 2021). The process of "fighting" the "ghosts of the past" is certainly not easy but is underway in Ukraine.

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Notes

1 I use Library of Congress transliteration, except in cases, such as that of Pavlo Arie, where the name is known differently in English. I have omitted diacritics except in citations. Clearly the theater world changed in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. My argument about post-socialism as a crisis of infrastructure stands, however, and I look forward to further research.
2 Thank you to Oksana Dudko for video of performance "Dukh teatru" (Filot Illuminate 2016).
3 Note that this is data from 2017 that has not been updated at the national statistics website.
4 Sadly, PostPlay theater closed during the pandemic (Shubs'ka 2020).
5 Together with Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, the Ukrainian Institute, the Ukrainian Book Institute, and the restructured Ukrainian State Film Agency are also a part of this new set of institutions (Pesenti 2020); as of 2021, the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation is undergoing some turmoil, and pessimists say its future remains uncertain. Yet in three years, the foundation created a strong team of administrators (largely women) who crafted and enacted policy that changed the rules of the game for funding culture. The successful seven hundred projects attest to the possibilities for equitable and transparent state funding, and the outcry over the state's latest interventions show how far Ukraine has come.

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