

Critical Acts

Theatre as Refuge

Staging the War in Ukraine at Berlin's Schaubühne

Emily Goodling



Figure 1. Holger Bülow shows photos from the early days of the war in *Sich waffnend gegen eine See von Plagen* [To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles], a project by Stas Zhyrkov and Pavlo Arie, Schaubühne, September 2022. (Photo by Gianmarco Bresadola)

In the opening scene of *Sich waffnend gegen eine See von Plagen* (ОЗБРОЮЮЧИТЬСЯ ПРОТИ МОРЯ ЛИХ, To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles, 2022) at the Schaubühne in Berlin, three performers walk onto the stage: two are

Ukrainian, from director Stas Zhyrkov's own ensemble at the Left Bank Theater in Kiev; one is a German actor from the Schaubühne. Laughing and joking, they begin to hum and then sing an off-key rendition of a pop tune.

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Figure 2. Oleh Stefan introduces himself to the audience in *Sich waffnend gegen eine See von Plagen* [*To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles*], a project by Stas Zhyrkov and Pavlo Arie, *Schaubühne*, September 2022. (Photo by Gianmarco Bresadola)

Against the backdrop of their voices, Ukrainian performer Oleh Stefan begins to tell his story: he lived a childhood positioned between Moldavian, Ukrainian, and Russian identities, and speaks about his slow realization of his Ukrainian heritage despite the Russian name originally written in his passport. At one point, he starts to sing a folk song in Ukrainian. At the premiere, a woman from the audience joined in—first quietly, then more strongly as Stefan gestured to her to continue. The impromptu duet only lasted a few seconds, but it set the tenor for the evening: *To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles* centers a handful of individuals who are living a painfully current conflict, speaking to an audience of Ukrainians and Germans in a country on the other side of Europe. This focus on bridge-building is reflected in the practicalities of the performance: the individuals onstage speak their native languages of German and Ukrainian, backed by projected subtitles that make the piece accessible to audiences from both countries.

To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles, a coproduction led by displaced Ukrainian director Stas Zhyrkov and dramaturg Pavlo Arie, premiered in September 2022 at the *Schaubühne*, one of Berlin's many state-funded

theatres with a reputation for politically oriented, often hard-hitting contemporary theatre. The *Schaubühne* is not alone in its theatrical engagement with the war of aggression in Ukraine: since the outbreak of the conflict on 24 February 2022, German theatres have responded to the crisis with a series of both newly commissioned works and politically charged productions of classic texts. Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theater, for instance, brought together female refugees from Ukraine and Belarus to form a powerful chorus in *Mothers: A Song for Wartime* (November 2023); and restaged Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death* and Euripides's *Iphigenia* in a two-pronged denunciation of the war that premiered just weeks after its start (April 2022). For the 2023/2024 season, the *Schaubühne* is revisiting the topic with its own project, *Postcards from the East* (January 2024), again with Stas Zhyrkov, which documents an ongoing dialog between old friends on Ukrainian resistance against Russia.

The war in Ukraine is uniquely urgent to Germans—politically, culturally, and theatrically. Beyond Vladimir Putin's broader threat to Western democracies and the global horror at the violence and tenacity of his campaign against Ukraine, there is also the geographic

proximity of the two countries: leaving Berlin in a car, it takes just over nine hours to reach the Ukrainian border. At the same time, the war has triggered seismic shifts within Germany. Chancellor Olaf Scholz heralded a national *Zeitenwende* (turning point) three days after the outbreak of the war in a speech to the Bundestag, the German parliament, where he stated with uncharacteristic intensity that “the world before is not the same as the world after [the invasion]” (Scholz 2022).¹ Most important for German domestic and foreign policy, Scholz also called for Germany to make significant financial investments in their military in order to take on a more central role in Europe’s defenses, a policy move that is not self-evident in a country that has struggled after World War II with how much military power to wield. At the same time, an ongoing influx of refugees has prompted a reconsideration of dialog around immigration and Germany’s role in the European Union. Germany’s right-wing extremist party, Alternative for Germany, has called for an end to German military support as well as financial sanctions against Russia, and both far-left- and far-right-wing voices continue to flirt with pro-Putin positions.

Unsurprisingly given Germany’s long history of politically oriented theatre, the stage has proven a central medium of engagement with these topics. In *To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles*, Zhyrkov comments on the broader significance of the war within Europe, while also zooming in on theatre itself, as institution and praxis: it emerges both as a means of engagement with war and also as a place of refuge, a sounding board for Ukrainian citizens, and actors in particular, who suddenly found themselves in February 2022 in a war against Russia.

The title of Zhyrkov’s production comes from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In what is probably theatre’s most famous monolog, Hamlet muses on the proper way to face the overwhelming pain and complexity of human existence as he contemplates suicide:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous
fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. (*Hamlet* 3,
1:1–4)

His words underpin the central question of Zhyrkov’s production, but with a new, painfully pragmatic twist when juxtaposed against the unfolding war and the Schaubühne itself: What type of action should actors take in a nation under attack? Should they literally “take arms”? Should they make theatre or go to the front lines? Although differently parsed than in *Hamlet*, both the professional and actual lives of the performers are at stake, as the war threatens both their livelihood and their physical safety. As the description of the production on the Schaubühne website puts it:

What does it do to your body and your
mind to handle a weapon? What does
it mean to take up a rifle or a gun,
objects designed to inflict damage and to
destroy—especially if one’s own life has
been focused on imagining and creating
fictional worlds? (Schaubühne 2022)²

These questions are extremely personal for Zhyrkov and his ensemble. Since 2019 he has been artistic director of the Left Bank Theater in Kiev. But shortly after the start of the war he decided to leave Ukraine with his family. In a conversation with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s German Studies unit in September 2023, Zhyrkov explained that this decision was not an easy one:

I was afraid to die. I never was in the army [...] and then of course the main question was my family. You know, the moment when you say goodbye to your family at the border, and you can’t understand when you will see them one more time—I don’t know, it’s a really hard question. I was crying. (Zhyrkov 2023)

At the time of this writing in December 2023, Zhyrkov views it as his mission to continue to make theatre both in Ukraine and elsewhere, and has found a theatrical home particularly in German-speaking countries.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German are mine.

2. English in original.



Figure 3. Dmytro Oliinyk uses photos from his childhood to narrate his life story. Holger Bülow and Dmytro Oliinyk in *Sich waffnend gegen eine See von Plagen [To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles]*, a project by Stas Zhyrkov and Pavlo Arie, Schaubühne, September 2022. (Photo by Gianmarco Bresadola)

The two Ukrainian performers, Dmytro Oliinyk and Oleh Stefan, also chose to continue to perform both at home and abroad. In a collaborative documentary style that integrates authentic materials from their past and present lives, they speak throughout the production about their experiences with the war, and in particular their decision to remain in the theatre and not join the Ukrainian military. All three performers also take turns narrating the stories of four other Left Bank ensemble members who decided to enlist in the military. One of them was seriously wounded, recovered, and has since returned to the front; another has been missing for months and, at the time of Zhyrkov's conversation at MIT, remained missing.

Throughout *To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles*, the performers use their own names, show photos from their childhood, use videos taken by their colleagues on the front lines, and speak earnestly about their experiences

of national identity, war, and making art. In so doing, they align themselves with “theatre of real people,”³ which features nonprofessional performers playing themselves onstage, or, more accurately, what I term the “theatre of authenticity,” a mode of performance that centers the extratheatrical identities and experiences of professional actors as opposed to the fictional roles they are adopting in performance. Theatrical authenticity is well anchored particularly in the Berlin theatre scene. The city's much-lauded Maxim Gorki Theatre, for instance, has established a national name for itself with an intersectional ensemble that frequently forefronts the extra-theatrical identities of its members. Zhyrkov's production takes on a particular urgency because it is about an ongoing war: Berlin audiences are used to seeing people “being themselves” onstage, but the subject matter still feels shocking and uncomfortably close to home. As the German performer Holger Bülow says, “Even now it is

3. See Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (2012) and her edited book, *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (2010). And, for an examination that focuses on a recent German context, see Ulrike Garde et al. (2016). For a discussion of theatre of authenticity, see Emily Goodling and Lianna Mark (2022).



Figure 4. Oleh Stefan, Dmytro Oliinyk, and Holger Bülow parody trying on all the equipment needed for a war in Sich waffnend gegen eine See von Plagen [*To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles*], a project by Stas Zhyrkov and Pavlo Arie, Schaubühne, September 2022. (Photo by Gianmarco Bresadola)

hard to understand what is happening there; it's not that far away from us at all" (Zhyrkov and ensemble 2022).⁴

The production supports this immediacy in its aesthetic. The three performers are pushed up against the front of a stage by a long table behind them, stacked with bright orange canisters containing rolls of film. The table is backed by a floor-to-ceiling screen that towers above the individuals onstage, onto which the personal materials are projected. The color orange immediately connects to the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, a period that fostered the country's development of national unity and identity.⁵ The Schaubühne audiences are asked to consider the current war in the context of Ukraine's history as they are reminded of the country's potential for revolution and growth (Khodunov 2022). The rolls of film also reference the documentary immediacy of what is

being presented onstage—the performers hold them in their hands as they share personal anecdotes from their childhood or theatre career in Kiev. Perhaps, too, the canisters represent the unstable, unsettling nature of the conflict itself: film is explosively flammable.

At the same time, not every scene in the production is marked by authenticity or documentary-style reportage. In an interlude entitled "What to Take to War," for instance, performers step momentarily into slapstick and parody. Speaking like auctioneers, they begin to examine the contents of several large Ikea bags they have dragged onstage, allegedly stuffed with everything one needs to go to war. But the steel-toed boots, rain gear, and antimicrobial underwear they advertise are nowhere to be found. In an increasingly ridiculous sequence, they unpack and adorn each other in high heels, old wool ponchos, spray deodorant, and

4. All quotes from *To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles* are my translations from the script provided to me by the theatre company. Translations of quotes from the script are my own.

5. The Orange Revolution took place between November 2004 and January 2005, following a presidential election protesters claimed was severely corrupt. Mostly peaceful, the revolution witnessed a series of protests, strikes, and sit-ins across the country and culminated in the displacement of unfairly elected Viktor Yanukovich by the second leading candidate Viktor Yushchenko.

sparkly thongs. At first this scene seems odd, out of step with the rest of the work. Perhaps, though, it intentionally reflects the chaos, absurdity, and senselessness of war. Most certainly, it also comments on Germany's initial reaction to a looming Russian invasion: in a move that drew mockery from Ukraine and other European nations, the country responded to an early request for military aid by offering to send a mere 5,000 protective helmets instead of the requested weapons. As Kiev mayor Vitali Klitschko responded, "What kind of support will Germany send next, pillows?" (in Boffey and Oltermann 2022).

As its title indicates, the traditional theatre canon broadly considered is present in *To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles*. The production also references Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as Stefan weaves Beckett's play into his personal narratives—memories of performing *Godot* in Ukraine mix with the suspense and endless waiting at the start of the war. In Kiev, Stefan played Vladimir (Didi) and remembers his co-star Estragon (Gogo), played by an unnamed ensemble member who has since gone to the front: "My Gogo—not just a colleague, partner, but also a loyal friend and brother to me. He is there, I am here. Now he is forever a hero of my country. And me? What am I now? Just Didi?"⁶ Stefan/Didi carefully unfolds a photo of his friend, his voice breaking.

This intertextual *modus operandi* is typical for Zhyrkov, who most often references the drama of classical antiquity. His *Antigone in Butscha*⁷ premiered in May 2023 at the Schauspielhaus Zürich, and in November 2023 he had begun working on an adaptation of the *Oresteia* in Düsseldorf (Zhyrkov 2023). I asked him about his use of canonical texts in our conversation at MIT, and he emphasized that they lend weight and depth to current crises. "Now it is time again for these types of plays. Now is the time of big stories, because history is happening: the old Greeks, Shakespeare, Schiller. These classical texts have the space, the room, for big questions" (Zhyrkov 2023). The turn to the great dramas of the Western theatre canon seems to have a particular resonance for other playwrights working on stories of war and

displacement, as well as contemporary societal issues more broadly speaking. Austrian Elfriede Jelinek's seminal 2013 drama *Die Schutzbefohlenen* (Charges), for instance, looks back to Aeschylus's *The Suppliants* to tell the story of a protest carried out by Middle Eastern refugees in a church in Vienna; similarly, Nurkan Erpulat and Jens Hillje's *Verrücktes Blut* (Crazy Blood, 2013) weaves Friedrich Schiller's 18th-century dramas into a commentary on immigration, violence, and education in contemporary Berlin.

Just as it uses canonical dramas to reflect on a contemporary conflict, *To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles* also provides a metareflection on theatre itself—on its value as institution, locus, and praxis in times of crisis. Holger establishes this metacommentary in his opening monologue. At first, he says, he had doubts about the role of theatre in the present moment: "But theatre? About the situation of a war? A war that is taking place right now?" Soon, however, he describes how the Schaubühne came to function as a seat of family, unity, and literal protection for the entire ensemble, and particularly those displaced by war—a guarantor of meaning and stability in a quickly changing world. This is particularly true for the Ukrainian ensemble members. As dramaturg Pavlo Arie writes in a diary entry performed by Holger, the first days of the war cast his world into crisis and, as a result, he says, "In search of some kind of meaning I went to the theatre." In the end, *To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles* is oriented less toward the audience than the individuals who are a part of the theatre itself—less about raising awareness or entertaining spectators than it is about sheltering and providing meaning to the displaced theatre artists and demonstrating that possibility to viewers.

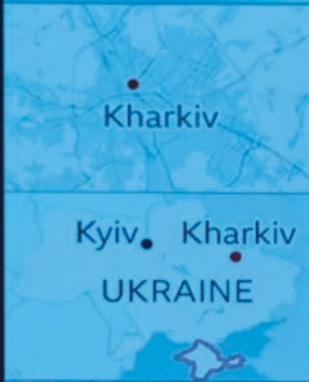
At the same time as it engages in a metadiscourse about the role of theatre, *To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles* is tied to an immediate, specific political-military situation, one with varied impacts across Europe and the world. The audience is immediately struck by the difference between Holger's portrayal of the war and that of Dmytro and Stefan. To Holger, war is something distant, "something

6. Translations from Ukrainian by Myloslava Khomenko.

7. Butscha was the seat of a mass murder of civilians by Russian troops in 2022.

Missile attack on council building in Kharkiv

BEFORE



AFTER



Image credits: Google / Getty Images

BBC





Figure 6. Holger Bülow narrates the beginning of the war in Kiev in the final scene of *Sich waffnend gegen eine See von Plagen* [*To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles*], a project by Stas Zhyrkov and Pavlo Arie, *Schaubühne*, September 2022. (Photo by Gianmarco Bresadola)

that only takes place in the news” since the end of WWII. To Dmytro and Stefan, in contrast, war is an immediate reality that is not unprecedented given the long history of antagonism between Russia and Ukraine. Holger continues, “The start of the war in Ukraine is different, closer, less comprehensible. Europe.” His words echo those of Olaf Scholz in his *Zeitenwende* speech: “Many of us have our parents’ or grandparents’ stories of war still in our ears; for the younger generation, it is hardly comprehensible: war in Europe” (Scholz 2022). There is irony and tension in both statements, first and foremost because they are simply untrue: the Balkan wars happened in Europe only a few decades ago. Most revealingly, however, Holger’s statement points to a blind spot in Germany’s reading of the Ukraine war. Normally all too quick to split Europe into

East and West, South and North, now some Germans are all too quick to describe the situation in Ukraine as an unprecedented affront to a unified, shocked monolith. Zhyrkov’s production, unwittingly or not, thus also comments on the concept of Europe itself: yes, this war is shocking and horrible, but how does our point of observation within Europe change our perspective on and experience of the situation?⁸

In the production’s final scene, the three actors squeeze into a tiny box onstage representing Pavlo Arie’s apartment in Kiev. In a pitch-black theatre, they extend their hands into a single spotlight and begin to repeat sentences that touch on all their fallen friends—they will never teach their sons to ride a bike, they will never make coffee for their wives again. The war will end someday, and these three will sit in a sunny café in Kiev and eat

Figure 5. (previous page) Dmytro Oliinyk looks at the results of a bombing in Kharkiv in *Sich waffnend gegen eine See von Plagen* [*To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles*], a project by Stas Zhyrkov and Pavlo Arie, *Schaubühne*, September 2022. (Photo by Gianmarco Bresadola)

8. MIT student Haris Imamović commented on the inherent irony of these statements in my seminar “A Literary Investigation of German Politics,” September 2023.

ice cream and watch the victory parade outside. But not the others—“Never, never, never.”

In his conversation at MIT, Zhyrkov also looked forward to the end of the war, and to the theatre he hopes to create in his country to celebrate a Ukrainian victory. As in his production at the Schaubühne, he focused on the potential of theatre as praxis and institution.

There will be two main topics for me in the theatre I will create: the future of my country, the future of democracy, what we need to do to make the war not become real one more time—it’s impossible, but theatre always thinks about impossible things, like love [laughs]. And the other topic of course is therapy. That’s what theatre can do with the people who will come back from the war. [...] For somebody to come to the stage and tell his or her story—this will be therapy. (Zhyrkov 2023)

To Take Arms against a Sea of Troubles, far from the front lines, is only the start.

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