

Blair A. Ruble

## **The Arts of War**

Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

Year Two



Blair A. Ruble

**THE ARTS OF WAR**  
Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

Year Two

*ibidem*  
Verlag

## **Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover art: Marichka Shtyrbulova as Ophelia in "Genesis. Opera of Memory."

Photo by Nastya Telikova. © Nastya Telikova 2024, Kyiv. Reproduced with kind permission.

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-1970-7

ISBN (EBook [PDF]): 978-3-8382-7970-1

© *ibidem*-Verlag, Hannover • Stuttgart 2025

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who commits any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Printed in the EU

## Author's Note

These essays all appeared in the Kennan Institute's *Ukraine Focus* blog at the Wilson Center over the course of the second year of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022. An earlier volume contains essays from the war's first year.<sup>1</sup>

The series grew from my need to respond to the horrendous events unfolding before me. Previous work relating the arts to social and political developments in Ukraine and Russia led me to turn to the work of Ukraine's artistic creators to better understand what has happened and what will happen.

I, like many, have been moved by the steadfastness of Ukrainians in the defense of their country. The stories presented here highlight the ways in which they have long explored the meaning of their country and culture through the arts, and the way the arts and their creators have empowered Ukrainians to confront the Russian invaders over the past two years. They also offer intriguing clues about the culture, society, and politics of a post-war Ukraine.

These essays represent my attempt to provide Ukrainian artists a place where they can speak for themselves. I have been fortunate in being able to collaborate in the preparation of these articles with several of the artists mentioned here. Aside from the introductory and concluding essays, I have striven to keep my own voice in the background. I purposefully follow a variety of performance and visual endeavors in a range of regional settings to capture the expanse of Ukrainian creativity. The 50 pieces here follow the course of the war's second year of profound resistance to the invasion and showcase a striking creative resilience. Together with those of last year, these tales reveal a deep reinvention of various art forms as a distinctive Ukrainian artistic voice consolidates.

The essays may be read chronologically, or by artistic genre: music, dance, theater, video, the visual arts, and so on. Readers may turn first to those set in specific locations: Kyiv, Kharkiv, Lviv,

---

<sup>1</sup> Blair A. Ruble, *The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia, Year One* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2023).

Odesa, etc. Alternatively, readers may direct their attention to the multiple connections—financial and creative—that have emerged between Ukrainian artists and the international community. Or they could search out the many moments when Ukrainian civilian and military authorities have endorsed the performing arts as a means of advancing their country’s fortunes. However approached, I am confident that even the most informed readers will discover a depth and creativity to the Ukrainian artistic scene that they hardly suspected existed prior to the Russian invasion.

Blair A. Ruble  
Washington, DC

# Table of Contents

Author's Note.....	5
1: Introduction: A Tale of Resistance and Resilience .....	9
2: Stoned Jesus and Not Feeling Powerless.....	13
3: The Power of a Girl with a Violin.....	15
4: Uniting Ukraine's Ballet Dancers .....	19
5: A Dance Tour with a Difference .....	23
6: Touching the Souls of All Who Listen .....	25
7: Opera Houses Take Center Stage .....	27
8: Ukrainian Fashion Takes Flight in Zurich.....	31
9: Even the Trees Needed Bandages .....	33
10: City Sounds: Kyiv .....	37
11: Turning to the Power of Music: Lviv .....	41
12: Looking Beyond the Apocalypse.....	45
13: The Story of One Woman and a Kitten Reveals the Pain of a Society .....	47
14: Moloch on an Odesa Beach .....	51
15: Defining Ukraine, One Page at a Time .....	53
16: Putting the Aggressor on Silent Mode.....	57
17: Serving Ukraine with Arms, and with Music.....	61
18: Turning the Swords into Art .....	63
19: Saint-Exupéry's <i>Little Prince</i> Lands in Kyiv .....	67
20: The Yermilov Centre Gives Meaning to Frontline Cities .....	71
21: Staying in Place.....	73
22: Cain and Abel in Dnipro .....	75
23: A Concertino from Hell .....	79
24: God Gave Humanity One More Chance .....	81
25: A Ukrainian Music Library in Your Pocket .....	85
26: Poetic Vengeance on a Father's Homeland.....	87
27: From Terra Incognita to Terra Cognita through Opera .....	89
28: A Theater Festival for the Brave .....	91
29: A Sunflower Grown in the Warsaw Winter.....	95
30: A Night at the Opera.....	97
31: Responding to Russian Aggression from the Stage .....	101

32: Blossoms of Well-Being, Hope, and Creativity .....	103
33: Unbearable Nightmares and Waiting for Dawn .....	107
34: Rendering the Invisible Visible through Folk Art.....	111
35: When the War Is Over ... A Poet Responds.....	115
36: Keeping a Frontline City Inhabitable: Kharkiv.....	117
37: Presenting Ballet Classics at a Time of War: Lviv .....	119
38: Not Letting Fear Stand in the Way.....	123
39: Bringing Music to Odesa’s Children.....	127
40: When Another Minute of War Becomes One Minute Before Christmas.....	129
41: It Was a Few Nights Before Christmas in Lviv.....	131
42: Holidays in a Time of War .....	133
43: A Fearless Blend of Old and New .....	135
44: Ukraine Looks West in Its Classical Repertoire.....	139
45: Discovering the Contemporary through the Ancient.....	143
46: Promoting Ukraine from Under the Big Top.....	145
47: Truths about Ukraine through Art.....	147
48: Not Everyone Can Be a Hero .....	149
49: Kharkiv’s Resilient Photography Tradition .....	153
50: Two Years of Horror, Hardship, and Hope .....	157
Acknowledgements.....	161
About the author .....	163
Index.....	165



# 1: Introduction: A Tale of Resistance and Resilience

Ukraine's artistic community, in all its diversity of genres, locations, and generations, immediately resisted the Russian full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022. As chronicled in my essays contained in the previous volume covering the war's first year,<sup>2</sup> they did so individually by taking up arms, providing home front support, and by picking up their pens, brushes, laptops, and iphones.

As the shock of war turned into sustained anger and defiance, Ukraine's artistic community – often in partnership with institutional and individual supporters abroad – developed more continuous collective responses. A return to live performance, accompanied by the creation of shared electronic platforms, demonstrated a stunning resilience that has begun to point to a vibrant postwar culture that will redefine the value of belonging in Ukraine. Fifty essays tracing the response of an evolving Ukrainian cultural community during the war's second year form the core of this volume.

As many of the essays in the first volume reveal, individual Ukrainian artists drew on their talents to battle the Russian grab for their country. Street artists immediately started painting patriotic murals, rock musicians took to social media to proclaim Ukraine's independence, dancers headed to Europe and formed companies which raised funds for their country's war efforts, and playwrights drew on international support to create new works reflecting the harsh realities of a country at war.

This initial response inspired a fresh appreciation for the country, both within and beyond Ukraine. The steadfastness of Ukrainians in the defense of their country surprised many, including, no doubt, many Ukrainians themselves. The stories from the war's first year suggest a deeper story. They highlight the ways in which Ukrainians have long explored the meaning of their country and

---

<sup>2</sup> See the essays in Blair A. Ruble, *The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia, Year One* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2023).

culture through the arts. They show the way the arts and their creators have empowered Ukrainians to confront the Russian invaders. They are stories of resistance.

Initial resistance began to give way to a longer-term commitment to defining Ukraine through the arts as soon as six months into the war. Clubs and rock concerts in basements and bars soothed jangled nerves and began to tell a collective story of a society recognizing its own power. Smaller venues across Ukraine began to open within the restrictions of martial law which established the parameters of performance, including a rule that audiences could only be as large as their bomb shelters could hold. By autumn, large theaters and galleries began to open, mounting ever more ambitious productions.

As the stories in this volume record, individual artists followed their own paths in resisting the Russian invasion. Professionals and amateurs began collecting the detritus left behind by retreating Russian troops to create public and private art, jewelry, and even musical instruments. Rock musicians blended traditional Ukrainian folk instruments and tunes into their popular works. Visual artists became particularly resourceful in making art that tells personal stories based on Ukrainian folk imagery. Playwrights similarly have turned their personal experiences into scripts shared on stages around Ukraine and the world.

Simultaneously, cultural institutions began to find a new equilibrium. Some purchased their own generators to keep the lights on; others expanded their bomb shelters. Major institutions supported dance, music, and theater festivals, even in a much-damaged Kharkiv. Kyiv's massive Arsenal bookfair returned on schedule. Those in the safer western regions welcomed displaced colleagues from the beleaguered east. Lviv and Kharkiv puppeteers collaborated to present new works for the year-end holidays; opera singers from damaged theaters in the east integrated seamlessly into opera companies in the west; galleries in more secure locations presented shows by artists facing danger every day in frontline communities.

The consolidation of institutional support for the arts—often with funding from abroad—prompted an exploration of an artistic heritage that had faded too far from view. Publishers celebrated out

of print Ukrainian authors. The classical music community created an online library of hundreds of composers who have contributed to the Ukrainian soundscape over centuries. Recent works came to light as well. Ukrainian theater found new audiences in unexpected places. By the close of the war's second year, Ukrainian plays were enjoying success in London, New York, and Washington. Hong Kong had sponsored a weeklong Ukrainian theater festival. These stories of resilience run through the pages to follow.

Another turn appeared as the war's second year ended and as this volume headed to press. Ukraine's artists and their institutional homes are becoming ever more ambitious as they feel increasingly secure in their ability to resist, survive, and create. Major orchestras toured abroad as well as performing at home; dance, opera, and theater companies remounted significant Ukrainian works that had fallen by the wayside; major galleries and museums avidly collected contemporary works responding to the war for future exhibitions. Such efforts suggest the outlines of a new cultural life that will be ready to burst forth once peace has returned.