

Blair A. Ruble

The Arts of War

Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

Year Four

The Arts of War

Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

Year One

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-1820-5

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-7820-9

Year Two

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

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

Year Three

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2070-3

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8070-7

Year Four

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2170-0

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8170-4

Blair A. Ruble

THE ARTS OF WAR
Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

Year Four

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

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

Cover photo: "Shell limestone" by Ivan Strakhov. The photo shows actor Mariia Cherkashyna holding a large stone fragment during her presentation "Shell limestone", held at Odesa National Fine Arts Museum on December 6th, 2025. Used with kind permission.

© copyright 2025 by Ivan Strakhov, Odesa

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2170-0

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8170-4

© *ibidem*-Verlag, Hannover • Stuttgart 2026

Leuschnerstraße 40
30457 Hannover
Germany / Deutschland
info@ibidem.eu

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

Table of Contents

1: Introduction.....	9
2: Kharkiv, Where the Arts Empower Life Over Death	11
3: Unexpected Artists	15
4: Elevating a Musical Tradition Too Long Neglected	17
5: On London’s Fringe.....	21
6: Italy Is Never Far Away in Odesa	23
7: Sharing Wartime Kharkiv’s Horrors Through the Language of Dance.....	25
8: Toads Singing in the Walls.....	27
9: Confronting Fate in a Time of War	31
10: Documenting War with Calmness	33
11: A Ukrainian Japanese Ballet.....	35
12: Reconnecting Ukrainian Opera with its Baroque Past	39
13: Saving Ukraine’s Future by Saving Its Culture	43
14: Kyiv’s Bright Spring Theater Season	45
15: Ukrainian Pop Stars Proclaim, “Your Thorny Path Is Not in Vain”	47
16: Bringing Unexpected Partners Together in Support of Ukraine.....	49
17: Creating a Ukrainian Classical Music Repertoire, One Work at a Time.....	51
18: Ballet’s Continuing Role in Bringing Ukraine to Audiences Around the World	53
19: In Ukrainian, Freedom and Will Are One.....	55
20: Embroidering Tradition and Contemporary Design Together	57
21: Comforting Odesan Souls with Sonic Beauty.....	59

22: Upbeat Fantasies Coming to Life on the Kyiv Stage.....	61
23: A Summer’s Frolic under Emerald Skies.....	65
24: Making an Anthill of Light from a Mountain of Totalitarian Darkness	67
25: The Comfort and Crush of True Friendship	69
26: Healing the Soul Through Music	71
27: The Global Reach of Ukrainian Folk Art on Display	73
28: How Do Animals Experience War?	75
29: Not Just Battles, but Humans.....	79
30: Kyiv Rock and Hip-Hop Fans Are Going Nowhere.....	83
31: Reawakening Fearless Kharkiv Through the Arts	85
32: Ukrainian Theater Takes On the World	87
33: Making Contemporary Theater in an Unexpected Place at an Unexpected Time	89
34: Ukrainian Punk Rock Can Handle the Harsh Realities of War	93
35: Bringing Renewed Life to Ukraine’s Adoration of Icons	97
36: Puppets Bring Comfort to a Troubled Holiday Season.....	101
37: Exploring the Labyrinth of Our Own Dark Passages Through Dance	103
38: Reinventing Theater Through Artificial Intelligence.....	107
39: Ukraine’s Fashion Scene: Not Just Surviving, but Thriving.....	111
40: Shahed Overture	113
41: Rediscovering the Vibrant Classical Music Scene in 1960s Kyiv	115
42: Converting Individual Traumas into Collective Memories	117
43: Remember that We Existed	121

44: Inventing Happy Endings to Ukraine’s Story	125
45: Channeling a Hard Life into Music.....	127
46: Photographs Leaving No Hiding Place from Wartime Horror.....	129
47: Dancing with the Heroes	131
48: Should She Stay or Should She Go?	133
49: Sunflower Kids with Art in Their Souls	135
50: And the Band Played On.....	139
51: The Opera House Was Packed.....	141
52: Surviving with Humanity Intact	143
53: Let’s Go to Work.....	145
54: Going Global	149
Acknowledgements.....	153
About the Author	155
Index.....	157

1: Introduction

The Ukrainian response to the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of its country inspired new appreciation for Ukraine, both within and beyond its borders. The steadfastness of Ukrainians surprised many. The stories, presented here, highlight the ways in which Ukrainians have long explored the meaning of their country and culture through the arts, and the way the arts and their creators empowered Ukrainians to confront the Russian invaders. These developments offer intriguing clues about the culture, society, and politics of a postwar Ukraine.

These essays represent my attempt to allow Ukrainian artists to speak for themselves. I have been fortunate to be able to collaborate in the preparation of these essays with several of the artists mentioned here. I have striven to keep my own voice in the background. I have followed a variety of performing and visual arts endeavors in a range of regional settings in order to capture the expanse of Ukrainian creativity. The 54 pieces here follow the course of the war's fourth year of profound resistance; they show a striking creative resilience. Together with those I have collected from the previous three years, these tales reveal a reinvention of various art forms as a distinctive Ukrainian artistic voice consolidates.

I began writing this series for the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute in Washington, DC. Between March 2022 and March 2025, 150 essays in this series appeared online as part of the institute's *Focus Ukraine* blog (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/collection/arts-war-ukrainian-artists-confront-russia>). Ibidem Verlag and Columbia University Press have published these collected posts in three volumes: *The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia, Year One* (2023), *Year Two* (2025), and *Year Three* (2025).

The essays in this volume cover the war's fourth year. They represent a relaunch of the series with the Center for International Theatre Development (CITD) following the Wilson Center's dismantling by the Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).

For more than three decades, CITD founders Philip Arnoult and Carol Baish, together with longtime collaborators John Freedman, Yury Urnov, and Howard Shalwitz, have encouraged me to explore the arts in post-socialist societies. My interest in this area arose during the mid-1990s, when I noticed that my Russian and Ukrainian friends spoke more about the arts than politics. I realized that these conversations were as much about politics as they were about the arts. Moreover, as they focused on the arts, my friends revealed the deep and growing divide between Ukrainians and Russians. This awareness set me on a path that prepared me to see the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion through the arts.

These essays may be read chronologically, or by genre (music, dance, theater, video, the visual arts, etc.). Turn to the index to seek those set in specific locations (Kyiv, Kharkiv, Lviv, Odesa, etc.). Direct your attention to the multiple connections, financial and creative, that have emerged between Ukrainian artists and the international community. Or 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 in these essays that they hardly suspected existed prior to the Russian invasion.

2: Kharkiv, Where the Arts Empower Life Over Death

May 5, 2025

Kharkiv lives, despite having lost around a quarter of its buildings and an unknowable number of its 1.5 million residents since Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022. The city's cultural scene thrives. This remarkable vitality continues to sparkle even during the war's fourth year.

Kharkiv's musicians, artists, dancers, and actors pursued their crafts in bomb shelters, metro stops, and basements as Russian bombs and rockets shook the city above. Opera singers and philharmonic violinists strolled through underground areas overflowing with those who had fled the horrors above. Painters and photographers set up makeshift galleries wherever they could. University professors arranged lectures about the arts for all who would listen.

Over time, these initiatives have become more ambitious. This past spring, young performers expanded the reach of alternative theaters, a new cultural center opened, and puppet masters found ways to entertain the city's anxious children.

The Nafta Theater, founded in 2018, has served as a vibrant alternative theater devoted to inspiring social change. Instead of performing traditional plays with linear plots, Nafta's actors interact with their audiences to develop a storyline through give and take. Their immersive play-making challenges audiences to rethink the society and city around them.

This theatrical model has served the company well at a time when Russian assaults interrupt everyday life. Some works—such as Mykola Kulish's expressionist comedy *Myna Mazailo*—transport viewers back to the 1920s to explore what the city was like when it was the capital of Soviet Ukraine. Others—such as the documentary performance *Nobody Died Today* created in partnership with the Austrian Theater im Bahnhof—seek to inform European audiences of the horrors unfolding in Ukraine.

As the subways have been transformed by war into community centers, performance spaces, and schools, the Nafta Theater recently captured this transformation through a three-episode audio drama, *Tunnels of Imagination*. In the first session, audience members tune in to ponder the metro-inspired inattention that causes passengers to lose sight of those around them. The second session focuses on the absurd characters who come and go through metro trains and stations, while the third creates a detective story played out on a single metro car.

If Nafta Theater's productions remain purposefully fleeting, Magran Tata's Druk cultural center seeks a degree of permanence. Tata, a Syrian refugee, arrived in Kharkiv in 2012 with his Ukrainian mother. Graduating from a local high school seven years later, he continued his education with degrees in architecture and urban planning. A leader in Ukraine's small Libertarian movement, Tata believes that conservatives should embrace cultural urbanism as strongly as those on the left. He conceived of the Druk center as a space amplifying a shared desire for freedom while serving as a focal point for youth culture. He secured funding from the Kharkiv City Council and moved ahead with the project, despite the war.

Housed in a 19th century printing house, the center's exposed brick interior yields spare yet attractive exhibition halls, conference rooms, and performance spaces open to the neighborhood and city. The Druk center's underground galleries launched this year, with an exhibition entitled "Art Shelter" focusing on the power of art to provide asylum from turmoil. The Ocheret Theater Company will perform in an adjacent renovated building.

Puppeteers Dariia Kushnirenko and Pavlo Saveliev have continued to present shows there every Sunday. They have done so to bring moments of joy at an otherwise terrifying moment. Their performances begin with assurances that it is okay to laugh, especially in difficult times. Their puppets demonstrate life lessons adapted for those whose families have been displaced and damaged by war. Kushnirenko and Saveliev have discovered that the adults in their audiences often are more moved than the children.

Several months ago, Oksana, a foster mother of six, told a reporter for the *Christian Science Monitor* that "we came here because

we knew it would make the children happy, but it's also important that they learn through the story that life goes on, that we all have trials, but life wins over death."

All of Kharkiv's intrepid artists and performers have demonstrated that the arts empower life to win over death, from the moment the first Russian rockets hit their city. They continue to do so.