

The Grain Store: A New Kind of Theatre in Ukraine

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More than 3.9 million Ukrainians died of starvation in a man-made famine between 1932-33. Their deaths were a direct result of Josef Stalin's collectivization policies which sought to centralize the distribution of grain and livestock throughout the Soviet Union. An essential strand of the policy was something called *dekulakization* (in Russian) or *rozkurkulennia* (in Ukrainian) which involved the imprisonment, deportation, and execution of millions of wealthy peasants whose land and property were subsequently seized by the state. Several regions in Russia and Central Asia also suffered immense loss of life during the process of forced collectivization but Ukrainian farmers and peasants bore the brunt of the suffering and starvation. In Ukraine and internationally this famine has come to be known as *Holodomor*, a designation that combines the Ukrainian word for hunger – *holod* – with the word for extermination – *mor*.

The 2009 play *The Grain Store* by Ukrainian playwright Natalia Vorozhbyt bears witness to this tragic series of events from her country's twentieth-century history. The text draws upon the traditions of nineteenth-century Ukrainian literature, village folklore, and her own family history in a play that skillfully and paradoxically integrates humour and irony as it seeks to portray the surreal circumstances surrounding the all-too-real murder of millions of Ukrainians under Soviet rule. The Shakespearean trope of star-crossed lovers is set against an incongruous backdrop of mass starvation. The play uses a modern lexicon as it incorporates stories the playwright recalls hearing from her grandmother as a child. The result is an exceptionally engaging and haunting script that was brought to life for the first time as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's (RSC) 'Revolutions' season in 2009.

The 'Revolutions' series was curated by RSC artistic director Michael Boyd who studied at the Malaya Bronnaya Theatre in Moscow in the 1970s and maintains a longstanding interest in Russian-language theatre. Boyd claims that his work in Moscow introduced him to a new way of directing, one in which the director takes 'an aesthetic, political and moral responsibility for the work.'¹ It was, in part, his experience in Moscow decades earlier that inspired Boyd to put out a call to

¹ Peter Aspden, 'A Ukrainian play in Stratford', *Financial Times*, 15 August, 2009, <https://www.ft.com/content/7ad62c9a-8861-11de-82e4-00144feabdc0#axzz1e>, accessed 17 August 2020.

Russian-language playwrights for new plays to be included in the RSC's 2009 season. The second commission alongside *The Grain Store* was a text by Russian playwrights Vyacheslav and Mikhail Durnenkov entitled *The Drunks* in which a young soldier returns home from the war in Chechnya and is subject to a series of tragi-comic events that highlight the absurdity and ubiquity of small-town corruption in provincial Russia. In addition to these two full productions of new plays, the 'Revolutions' project also included a series of lectures and staged readings in subsequent years as well as a new adaptation of Alexander Pushkin's 1825 play *Boris Godunov* in 2011.

At the time, the initiative was frequently referred to in the English-language press as a celebration of [Russian drama](#) and [Russian playwrights](#). In fact, the series of projects was initially billed under the working title 'Other Russia' before the company arrived at 'Revolutions' as a title more representative of the project's final content. The series was conceived, in part, out of an interest in showcasing the work of young Russian-language playwrights and also in attracting investment from wealthy Russian donors.² It is worth highlighting, however, that the events depicted in *The Grain Store* are explicitly set within a Ukrainian context and that as a playwright Natalia Vorozhbyt very clearly identifies her work as oriented toward a Ukrainian audience.

A common tendency to mix up the history of Ukrainian art, literature, and theatre with that of Russia is an enduring oversight made by critics and scholars both in the former Soviet region and in the west. It grows in part from a shared language and history that extends back to before the start of the Soviet Union in 1917. Indeed, several of the most revered contributors to the canon of so-called classic Russian literature, such as Nikolai Gogol and Mikhail Bulgakov, were in fact of Ukrainian origin. Although both authors spent much of their adult years living in Russia, their works were notably shaped by their Ukrainian background.

Ukraine is a multilingual country in which many people speak Ukrainian as a first language while others speak Russian. The majority of the population is conversant in both. During the Soviet era speakers of Ukrainian language were persecuted and Russian became the language most prominently used in urban and public life –

² Arifa Akhbar, 'Power of the rouble lures RSC', *The Independent*, 23 September 2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/news/power-of-the-rouble-lures-the-rsc-938939.html>, accessed 17 August 2020.

work, arts, business, science, etc. In these years, Ukrainian was frequently spoken at home and in villages particularly in the western part of the country but was viewed by the ruling class as provincial or in some sense lesser than Russian language. These are among the historical and political developments that have contributed to the popular portrayal of Ukraine as a country divided between Russian-speaking Soviet loyalists in the east and Ukrainian-speaking Euro-enthusiasts in the west. In truth, individual choices around languages and politics in Ukraine are not so easily categorized by simplistic spatial stereotypes.

Vorozhbyt grew up in the capital, Kyiv, in central Ukraine, speaking both Russian and Ukrainian. In the late-1990s she moved to Moscow to study at the Gorky Literary Institute. In those years, Russia saw a veritable boom in new playwriting as authors from across the former Soviet Republics sought to reflect the shifting social and political landscape in the region following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The term 'New Russian Drama' is now used to refer to what was, at the time, an emergent style of playwriting that used everyday language to depict the experiences of ordinary people on stage. In this way, Russian-language playwrights from countries such as Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus initiated a theatrical revolution and placed centre stage various communities and subcultures that were conventionally relegated to the margins of society such as homeless people, imprisoned women, and soldiers with PTSD.

Following the completion of her studies at the Gorky Literary Institute, Vorozhbyt remained in Moscow for several years and became a key figure in the country's New Drama movement. Her play *Galka Motalko* (2003) was awarded the Eureka Prize and her work was produced at several of Moscow's leading theatre venues. Even after returning to her hometown of Kyiv in 2005, Vorozhbyt continued to collaborate with many of her colleagues in Moscow both as a playwright and as a screenwriter. She was, in these years, best known for her writing on the popular Russian television programme *Shkola* (School), a series depicting the lives of a group of teenagers in a Moscow secondary school in an unprecedented gritty and explicit style.

Living in Kyiv at the time, Vorozhbyt was one of several playwrights who responded to the call from the RSC for Russian-language plays to be considered for their 2009 season. The prompt was for plays of a so-called 'Shakespearean scale' and it was with this directive in mind that Vorozhbyt began work on *The Grain Store*. According to the playwright, she had long intended to write a play about the events of

Holodomor, but she understood the work to be a large-scale project that would require resources beyond those of the mid-sized independent theatres in Russia and Ukraine where her works were most commonly produced.

The Grain Store was the first major play written about the famine in Ukraine. Several Soviet-era plays alluded to the tragic events of 1932-33, but *The Grain Store* is one of only two works to portray this integral part of Ukraine's twentieth-century history in explicit detail.³ *The Grain Store* was staged for the first time in Ukraine in 2015, more than six years after it was originally written. There was a production in rehearsals in Kolomyia in Western Ukraine just after the RSC premiere but following the presidential election in 2010 when Russia-allied president Viktor Yanukovich came to power, preparations for the production were halted by the incoming administration.

In a 2014 [interview](#) with the playwright, Vorozhbyt attributed the fact that the play had not yet been staged in Ukraine to two primary factors. First, she described the play as a grand scale production written for the RSC stage. Ukrainian theatre, she claimed at the time, was a poor theatre, and most directors did not have access to the means for such a high budget endeavor. In the RSC production, for example, audiences entered the auditorium to find a feast of Ukrainian cuisine laid out on a long table onstage. Those who had paid to do so in advance, were invited to the table to join the cast in a meal of borscht, varenniki (dumplings), and other traditional Ukrainian delicacies before the show began. Second, the playwright observed that Ukrainian directors in the first decade of the new millennium were reluctant to produce work on difficult topics such as *Holodomor* because, it seemed to her, they did not think audiences were ready to suffer at the theatre.

In other words, theatre in Ukraine in the early-2000s was most commonly viewed as a space for either high art or entertainment. Whereas the New Drama movement in Russia had already begun to transform some Russian theatres into venues for the renegotiation of cultural narratives, Ukrainians, according to Vorozhbyt, had yet to develop a culture of politically charged and socially engaged performance practice. After returning to Kyiv from Moscow in 2005, Vorozhbyt began collaborating with her Ukrainian colleagues on several initiatives intended to create space for a new kind

³ For more on these plays see, Larissa M. L. Zaleska, 'The *Holodomor* of 1932-1933 as Presented in Drama', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 37, 3 (Fall 2003), pp. 89-96, https://shron2.chtyvo.org.ua/Zbirnyk_statei/Canadian_American_Studies_Holodomor.pdf, accessed 17 August 2020.

of theatre in Ukraine. One early example of such an initiative is the new writing festival, 'A Week of Contemporary Plays' which stages a series of staged readings from the country's most exciting young playwrights every year.

Since that time, New Drama and socially engaged theatre practice has grown significantly in Ukraine and, in particular, since the Euromaidan Revolution in 2013/14 when millions of Ukrainians took to the streets in a series of revolutionary protests that led to the ousting of president Viktor Yanukovich and the overturning of the Ukrainian government. Following Euromaidan, Crimea was illegally annexed by Russian troops in a turn of events described by one political scientist as '[the most blatant land grab in Europe since World War II](#)'.⁴ In the aftermath of the Euromaidan Revolution and the annexation of Crimea, armed conflict broke out between the Ukrainian army and Russian-backed separatists who sought to annex the country's Eastern areas known as the Donbas region of Ukraine. These separatists have since been fighting to establish an independent government aligned with the Kremlin. The resulting and ongoing war in Donbas has claimed over 13,000 lives and led to the internal displacement of approximately 1.6 million Ukrainians since it began in 2014.

As a result of the Euromaidan Revolution, the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing war in Donbas, language has become additionally politicized in Ukraine. The country's multilingual and pluralistic population is frequently misconstrued by politicians and policy makers in order to portray the country as inherently divided between east and west. This simplified reading of Ukraine's national identities helps the country's network of power elites distract from the everyday corruption that has run rampant in government and law enforcement since well before the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014. In reaction to the war and the propaganda disseminated on both sides of the front line, many of Ukraine's artists, writers, and intellectuals have made the conscious decision to work exclusively in Ukrainian even if they previously wrote in Russian, Ukrainian, or both.

The Grain Store was originally translated into English from Russian. This is partly because the RSC was commissioning Russian-language plays and Russian was the

⁴ Steven Pifer, 'Five years after Crimea's illegal annexation, the issue is no closer to resolution', Order From Chaos Brookings Institute Blog, 18 March 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/18/five-years-after-crimeas-illegal-annexation-the-issue-is-no-closer-to-resolution/>, accessed 17 August 2020.

language Vorozhbyt was primarily writing in at that time. Additionally, pending inclusion in the RSC season, the text was slated to be translated by Sasha Dugdale, the leading Russian-to-English translator of New Russian Drama in the UK. Like Vorozhbyt, Dugdale had also been living in Moscow in the early-2000s and played a key role in the development of new Russian playwriting in her capacity as both a poet and a translator and in her work with the British Council, the UK-funded centre for cultural relations. Prior to 2009, Dugdale had already translated Vorozhbyt's one-act play *Khomenko Family Chronicles* which premiered at London's Royal Court Theatre in 2007 and has since translated several of the playwright's other commissions from UK theatres including *Take Out the Rubbish*, *Sasha* for the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh (2015) as well as *Maidan Diaries* (2015) and *Bad Roads* (2017) for the Royal Court. Following the RSC premiere, Vorozhbyt produced a Ukrainian version of the text which was the script used for the first Ukrainian production in 2015.

In a 2014 [interview with the theatre critic John Freedman](#), Vorozhbyt articulated some of the challenges she has faced as a bilingual Ukrainian playwright in recent years. 'In connection to the anti-Russian mood,' she described, in reference to the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, 'many of my Ukrainian friends have purposefully switched to Ukrainian exclusively. The pain and hurt and protest that I feel make me want to do the same. I very much feel that moment has arrived. Then I think, damn it, Russian is my language, too. Why should I have to give it up? I love it. I write in it. Protest against myself? I won't do that.'⁵

Since *The Grain Store* was written in 2009, and in particular since the Revolution in 2014, Ukrainian playwrights and theatre makers have reimagined the role of theatre in the new Ukrainian context. Vorozhbyt has been a leading figure in that process. In 2015 she co-founded the Theatre of Displaced People together with German director Georg Genoux. The group staged dozens of documentary theatre projects in which artists, activists, soldiers, and internally displaced people shared their own experiences of war and social unrest onstage.

⁵ John Freedman, 'The Nightmare of being a Russian-language Ukrainian playwright' *Moscow Times*, 20 July 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/07/20/the-nightmare-of-being-a-russian-language-ukrainian-playwright-a37483>, accessed 17 August 2020.

One particularly resonant project to have come out of the Theatre of Displaced People was the series of performances entitled *Children and Soldiers*, for which Vorozhbyt and her team travelled to several small cities in eastern Ukraine close to the frontline. Teenagers from the local schools were invited to participate in the project together with Ukrainian soldiers who were stationed in their town. Tension between soldiers who were often from western Ukraine and local residents from eastern Ukraine were common at the time and Vorozhbyt's project sought to create a common space in which the two groups could come together to share their stories and find common ground. After a week of work together, participants performed their autobiographical narratives for an audience of local residents and, in this way, aimed to stage an open dialogue about reconciliation and mutual understanding.

A second notable project Vorozhbyt curated in recent years was the collaborative playwriting programme for teenagers 'Class Act – East/West' which ran annually for three years between 2016-18. This initiative built upon a project first developed by a group of playwrights from the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh that has since been adapted not only for the Ukrainian context but has also been performed in dozens of Russian cities as well as in Mumbai. In the Ukrainian version of 'Class Act', 10 teenagers from a school in western Ukraine were invited to join 10 teenagers from a school in eastern Ukraine for two weeks of collaborative playwriting workshops in Kyiv. The students were paired with one another and with a mentoring playwright to write a 10-minute original script which was subsequently staged by a professional director and actors at the end of the two weeks. Here too Vorozhbyt sought to build bridges between different communities, to dispel destructive cultural stereotypes, and facilitate dialogue between the country's younger generations who are coming of age in a country at war.

As this essay illustrates, Vorozhbyt's work and influence extends across forms and national borders as a playwright, a screenwriter, and a curator of socially engaged participatory performance projects. She also recently made her directorial debut with a new screen adaptation of her play *Bad Roads* which won the Verona Film Club Award at the 35th annual International Film Critics' Week in Venice (2020). Although *The Grain Store* was not the first play of Vorozhbyt's to tackle the complexities of Ukrainian history and culture, it did mark a turning point for her career as a writer and as a public figure both in Ukraine and abroad.

Since her RSC commission in 2009, Vorozhbyt has been widely recognized as Ukraine's foremost new drama playwright. The prestige of her international reputation and the relative stability it has provided has helped support Vorozhbyt as she has taken a leading role in establishing a vibrant culture of socially engaged and experimental performance practice in Ukraine in more recent years. In this sense, the RSC premiere of *The Grain Store* can be understood as a historic production not only for having brought the events of *Holodomor* to an international stage for the first time and for having drawn attention to Ukrainian history, theatre, and culture abroad. It also played a key role in the development of twenty-first century Ukrainian theatre, in that it served to raise the profile of one of the country's most prolific, innovative, and politically challenging theatre makers.

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