Ukrainian New Drama after the Euromaidan Revolution

Take the Rubbish Out, Sasha
by Natalka Vorozhbyt

A Time Traveller’s Guide to Donbas
by Anastasiia Kosodii

Pilates Time by Olha Mysiupa

Bomb by Natalka Blok

House of Ghosts. Why. We. Fled. Donbas
by Andrii Bondarenko

I Don’t Remember the Name
by Kateryna Penkova

The Mother by Gorky
by Lena Lagushonkova

Tolyk the Dairyman
by Maksym Kurochkin

EDITED BY MOLLY FLYNN
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Molly Flynn
Introduction

Corresponding with playwright Andrii Bondarenko about including his play *House of Ghosts. Why. We. Fled. Donbas* in this anthology, we caught up over email about life and work in addition to discussing the details of the project. It was 11 February 2022, and Russia had amassed approximately 150,000 troops along the northern, eastern and southern borders of Ukraine. Global leaders were frantically seeking a diplomatic path to avoid an escalation in violence while major Western media sources portrayed an image of Europe on the brink of war. Inside Ukraine, however, people tried to remain calm. After all, Russia’s war in Ukraine had already been raging for the past eight years, albeit somewhat contained to the southern occupation of Crimea and the frontlines in the eastern region of Donbas. While international publics watched with anxiety as the Kremlin sent more and more heavy artillery towards its neighbour’s sovereign borders, inside the country life carried on. I shared with my friend and colleague a recent photo of my young daughter and asked how he was feeling in spite of it all. ‘All is well with me,’ he wrote. ‘Two of my plays are in rehearsals for new productions at the moment. As long as there’s no war, then everything will be grand.’ I have often reflected on the dry irony of his positive tone in these lines, which strikes me as characteristic of a certain period of Ukrainian playwriting in which, despite the ominous circumstances, the country’s community of writers persevered in coming together to build, against all odds, the creative conditions in which they wanted to live and to work. Two weeks later, in the early hours of 24 February 2022, Russian rockets began raining down on Ukrainian cities all across the country marking the start of what we now know as the Kremlin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a horrific turning point in the most brutal and bloody war on European soil since the Second World War.

A new production of Lena Lagushonkova’s award-winning play *The Mother by Gorky* was scheduled to premiere at Kyiv’s Golden Gate Theatre on 27 February 2022. The second text in a trilogy about the author’s hometown, *The Mother by Gorky* uses razor-sharp satire to investigate the intricacies of pride, family, shame and community, all set within the postcolonial context of a small city in eastern Ukraine. Like Bondarenko’s premieres mentioned above, along with countless other pioneering performances across the country, this production of Lagushonkova’s text was also cancelled after the start of the full-scale invasion as millions of people fled Ukraine and tens of millions of others sheltered in basements and metro stations, fearing for their lives amidst the onslaught of Russia’s shelling of civilian spaces. At the time of writing, in January 2023, the Kremlin’s all-out war in Ukraine is approaching its one-year mark. Over 6.5 million people have fled the country and it is so far impossible to say how many tens of thousands of lives have been lost as result of Russia’s ongoing attack on Ukrainian sovereignty. These lives lost and individuals displaced are, of course, in addition to the over 2 million people who were forced to flee their homes during the first eight years of the war and the 14,000 people killed between 2014 and 2022.

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1 Quoted and translated from the author’s private correspondence with the playwright.
Since 24 February 2022, Ukraine’s remarkably vibrant playwriting community has grown into a global phenomenon. Their texts, particularly those written since the start of the full-scale invasion, have been translated, produced and distributed with enthusiasm and fervour as vital testimonies from the front lines of Russia’s war against Ukrainian culture, language and history. In this way, Ukrainian playwriting has come to international prominence as one of the most crucial artistic reactions to the all-out war. As a medium it has been revealed to facilitate an incredibly rapid response to the war that has the capacity to bring people together in collective acts of witnessing and expressions of solidarity that stand in defiance to the Kremlin’s repeated attempts to deny and extinguish the notion of Ukrainian national identity. However, it is not only the form’s capacity for an immediate and nuanced reflection of current events that has drawn attention to the work of Ukrainian playwrights in the nearly twelve months since the full-scale invasion; it is also the vivacity, the vision and the vibrancy with which they have learned to approach their work in recent years that has ushered the texts of Ukrainian playwrights to the forefront of global political theatre since the Euromaidan Revolution in 2013–14.

The Euromaidan Revolution, otherwise known as the ‘Revolution of Dignity’ and also colloquially referred to simply as ‘Maidan’, brought over 2 million Ukrainians out to the streets in a series of protests in defence of democracy, human rights and economic transparency. Between November 2013 and February 2014, a surprisingly diverse demographic of citizen activists all across the country withstood below zero temperatures and increasingly violent police crackdowns to speak out against corruption and injustice and to express an explicit popular call for closer trade relations with Europe and less economic dependency on Russia. Their demands were met with extreme brutality on the part of state security forces. The violence reached a terrifying intensity in February 2014 when over 100 unarmed protesters were shot down by sniper fire in central Kyiv. The next day Russia-allied president Viktor Yanukovych fled to Russia where he remains today. In the weeks directly following the ousting of Yanukovych, Russia illegally occupied the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and began sending troops and weapons to the Donbas in eastern Ukraine instigating and perpetuating a conflict between the Ukrainian army and a small group of radical separatists seeking to establish two breakaway territories on the border with Russia. This deadly war on the edge of Europe was frequently referred to in international media as a ‘frozen conflict’ and a ‘forgotten war’ in its first eight years. After an initial burst of attention from global media sources and a series of failed diplomatic efforts to negotiate an agreement between the two neighbouring countries in 2014 and 2015, international interest in Russia’s war in Ukraine began to fade. Meanwhile Russia was emboldened.

In the intervening years, Ukraine saw an extraordinary boom in new playwriting as theatre-makers from across the country used their craft as a form of social activism to revitalize investment in the arts and the civic sphere. This theatrical revolution was led, in large part, by Ukraine’s playwrights who developed new artistic languages with which to reflect, reconsider and reimagine their country’s shifting socio-cultural landscape. As a multilingual country in which the majority of people are conversant in both Ukrainian and Russian, many of Ukraine’s most talented playwrights were more oriented towards Russia in the early 2000s as a country that was not only home to a burgeoning community of activist playwrights, but also a country with the commercial
and financial resources to offer writers the chance to make a living, if not as playwrights then as screenwriters, ad writers, etc. In the years leading up to Maidan, this trend began to turn, in large part thanks to the founding of several key initiatives purpose-built to foster a culture and community of playwriting inside Ukraine. The Ukrainian-language new playwriting festival ‘Drama.UA’ founded in Lviv in 2010 served precisely this purpose as did, perhaps most influentially, the ‘Week of Contemporary Plays’ festival which was founded in Kyiv in 2011. Both festivals also featured workshops and seminars from international theatre-makers offering Ukrainian playwrights new access to developments within the broader European theatre repertoire. For Ukrainian theatre-makers, these festivals were among the developments that laid the foundation for a radical reimagining of the country’s creative community in the years directly following Maidan.

Ukrainian New Drama after the Euromaidan Revolution brings together eight key works of dramatic literature from the years between 2014 and 2022, the majority of which are published here in English translation for the first time. The anthology includes established Ukrainian voices from the international theatre repertoire like Natalka Vorozhbyt and Maksym Kurochkin, as well as iconic plays from Ukraine’s post-Maidan generation of playwrights: Natalka Blok, Andrii Bondarenko, Anastasiia Kosodii, Lena Lagushonkova, Olha Matsiupa and Kateryna Penkova. Considered together these eight plays reflect the diversity of voices in Ukraine as a country seeking to comprehend both the personal and political consequences of the Revolution, the occupation of Crimea and Russia’s ongoing attack on Ukrainian culture. Although these texts were all written before February 2022, they provide important insight into the incredible culture of resistance and resilience in Ukraine that has so captured the public imagination since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion. For it was in the eight years before the all-out war that Ukrainian playwrights discovered new modes of articulating their experiences and seeking out ways to express and explore a civic national identity built upon inclusivity and plurality, democracy and transparency, and one that stood in opposition to an ethnic national identity rooted in homogeny and cultural divisions. In this way, Ukrainian theatre in general and the practice of playwriting in particular created the conditions for a groundbreaking form of arts activism that illuminates theatre’s potential as a space for social change.

The plays included here are presented in the loose chronological order in which they were written offering readers the chance to observe how certain themes, genres and perspectives were interpreted and developed differently throughout the first eight years of Russian aggression. The first play, Natalka Vorozhbyt’s text Take the Rubbish Out, Sasha, was written in 2015 the year after Maidan and the start of the war. Depicting the experiences of two women, fifty-five-year-old Katya and her thirty-three-year-old daughter Oksana, this play excavates the absurdities of modern life, death and birth in the years directly preceding and following the start of the war. The intricacies of grief and loss, both personal and political, are at the heart of this tragicomedy, articulated as always with Vorozhbyt’s signature style of empathic irony. To begin this collection with Vorozhbyt’s text speaks in part to the pivotal part she has played in the development of Ukrainian New Drama.

Born and raised in Kyiv, Vorozhbyt first gained notoriety in the early 2000s as a seminal figure in the development of Russian-language New Drama. Working in
Moscow at that time, Vorozhbyt’s early plays were met with international and critical acclaim, including commissions from major UK theatres such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal Court. Returning to Kyiv in 2004 during the Orange Revolution, Vorozhbyt has been a driving force behind many of Ukraine’s most pivotal theatre initiatives including the founding of the ‘Week of Contemporary Plays’ festival in 2011 and the co-creation of the Ukrainian documentary theatre company the Theatre of Displaced People in 2015 together with German director Georg Genoux. Her collaborative 2014 verbatim theatre project *Maidan Diaries* composed from over eighty hours of interviews with citizen activists was a crucial inspiration to Ukraine’s newest generations of writers, many of whom came to see themselves and their work as historically significant perhaps for the first time, in part, through Vorozhbyt’s work.

Next the anthology presents three texts written between 2017 and 2018 that exemplify some of the ways in which playwrights were processing their experiences of living in a country in which the war in Donbas had become part of people’s everyday lives. Anastasiia Kosodii’s *A Time Traveller’s Guide to Donbas* is set in the year 2036 when time travel in Ukraine has been nationalized by the ministry of education and science. Such is the set-up for the time-travelling cross-country road trip undertaken by the two characters at the centre of Kosodii’s text as they set off to discover the precise moment, location and sequence of events that started the war. Olha Matsuip’a’s play *Pilates Time*, also written in 2017, is described by the author as a ‘free-flowing poetic thriller’ that uses a fantastical framework to depict the absurd horror of carrying on with the comforts of middle-class life while the violence and trauma of war bleed through to one’s everyday experiences. The third text included from these years is Natalka Blok’s *Bomb* which tells the story of a young woman who was born in 1991, the first year of Ukrainian independence. After discovering that what she thought were symptoms of an anxiety disorder are in fact the signs of a ticking time bomb implanted in her chest by the Ukrainian government, Dasha is faced with a weighty decision. By detonating the bomb, and sacrificing herself in the process, Dasha has the chance to return Ukraine to 1991 so as to begin its journey of independence anew. Part political satire, part magical realism, Blok’s *Bomb* is an incisive exploration of individual responsibility in times of cultural conflict.

Lastly, the anthology presents four plays written in 2019 when, after five years of war, Ukrainian playwrights had firmly established their work as a mode of civic activism and created the cultural conditions for the communal exploration of what kind of country Ukraine could become. In Andrii Bondarenko’s *House of Ghosts. Why. We. Fled. Donbas* a mother and her teenage daughter have been displaced by the war in its early years and find themselves in a central Ukrainian village haunted both literally and figuratively by its past, present and future. Tensions between east and west Ukraine are revealed throughout the play as secondary to broader questions about the nature of violence, both political and sexual, as it draws attention to the echoes of aggression resonating out from the frontline across the country. *I Don’t Remember the Name* by Kateryna Penkova also places female voices from Donbas at the centre of her text, a play about intergenerational memory that traverses both temporal and national borders. At the centre of this play is Katya, who speaks in the first person from a holding cell on the border between Ukraine and Poland about her late-Soviet childhood growing up in Donetsk and her decision to relocate to Kyiv at the age of seventeen. An eloquent
depiction of the interplay between remembering and forgetting, I Don’t Remember the Name is at once astonishingly forthright and strikingly lyrical, an unusual balance the play strikes with grace and skill. Next in the series is Lena Lagushonkova’s The Mother by Gorky, an intricate and idiosyncratic rapid-fire dialogue reflecting the brutality of love, life and loss in the small-town postcolonial Ukrainian context.

The final text in this collection comes from Maksym Kurochkin, another seminal figure in the recent development of Ukrainian New Drama. The 2019 play Tolyk the Dairyman is an adaptation of the classic series of short stories by Ukrainian Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem, on whose work the musical Fiddler on the Roof is based. In Kurochkin’s innovative take on Aleichem’s nineteenth-century narratives, Tolyk and his family find themselves in the familiar Ukrainian village of Boyarka, only this time in 1986 in the immediate aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Everyday life in Boyarka continues, even in the face of tragedy and propaganda. In fact, it is through the comedy and banality of village life that the protagonists of the play start to distinguish themselves from their Soviet identities and grapple with their sense of themselves as Ukrainians and as Jews. Resonating across centuries of Ukrainian Jewish history, tradition and literature, Tolyk the Dairyman poses important questions about the country’s colonial history and the nature of national identity in the contemporary Ukrainian context.

Closing the collection with Kurochkin’s text also points to his pivotal role in one of the most influential and exciting developments in Ukrainian New Drama since the Euromaidan Revolution, the creation of the Theatre of Playwrights. Like Vorozhbyt, Kurochkin also came of age as a writer in the context of Russian-language New Drama having lived much of his adult life living and working in Moscow. He returned to Kyiv following Maidan, the occupation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas, and has since dedicated himself to fostering and contributing to the vibrant and vivacious community of Ukrainian playwriting evidenced by the texts included in this anthology. Most notable in this context has been the founding of the Theatre of Playwrights, Ukraine’s only democratically run playwright-led artists collective. Created in 2020, the group brings together twenty of the country’s leading playwrights, including all of the authors featured in this anthology. Having first come together to discuss working conditions for playwrights in Ukraine with an eye towards establishing a labour union, the group soon developed into an unprecedented artistic movement for Ukraine that placed the playwright at the centre of its theatrical process.

The project was spearheaded by Kurochkin, together with Ukraine’s most civic-minded New Drama playwrights. Members of the collective initiated several key projects in the theatre’s first years including new playwriting festivals for female playwrights and for first-time playwrights, as well as an open access digital database of new Ukrainian plays, all the while seeking out a venue for the collective to call a creative home. In 2021, renovations for the theatre began. What was at that time a run-down basement space in central Kyiv was destined to grow into Ukraine’s most acclaimed New Drama venue. After several invite-only events and work-in-progress readings in the winter of 2021/22, the theatre’s premiere was scheduled for 12 March of that year. Needless to say, the planned Theatre of Playwrights premiere became another theatrical casualty of Russia’s full-scale invasion. As Natalka Vorozhbyt describes in her Foreword to this anthology, the group’s members are, at the time of writing, scattered across the globe. Some have temporarily relocated to other countries,
others volunteered as part of the territorial defence units at the start of the invasion and have since joined the military. Still other writers from the collective have remained in towns and cities that are currently occupied by Russia.

Nonetheless, they continue to write. Their works are now staged by theatre practitioners across the globe in expressions of solidarity and support. At home in Ukraine, performances and staged readings also continue despite Russia’s persistent and lethal attacks on artistic and cultural spaces. In fact, the Theatre of Playwrights has even hosted several public events featuring the group’s most recent works. These events, the collective emphasizes, however, do not mark an official opening of the theatre’s doors. For the true premiere of the venue and the company, they say, will take place only after Ukraine has won the war. This clear statement of conviction, courage, determination and defiance characterizes so much of what we have witnessed about Ukrainian art and culture not only since February 2022 but, as this collection seeks to emphasize, since the start of Russia’s war in Ukraine in 2014. While no one can predict how or when this war will end, there is no doubt that we will be living with its consequences for generations to come. For this reason, among others, *Ukrainian New Drama after the Euromaidan Revolution* speaks to an urgent need in public policy and the study of arts activism as evidence of a creative movement with global resonance. As a collection, this anthology seeks to amplify Ukrainian voices, steady international focus on the impact of Russia’s war in Ukraine, and provide international readers and audiences with unprecedented access to some of the most innovative and socially engaged new playwriting on the world stage today.

Molly Flynn
Foreword: A kick up the ass

Ukrainian playwriting got a kick up the ass back in 2013 with the start of Euromaidan Revolution. At that time, the form’s already rapid development became charged by the dramas and tragedies of the realities in which we suddenly found ourselves.

Yet, in another sense, the foundation for this shift had already been laid. The first New Drama festival, ‘A Week of Contemporary Plays’, was founded in 2011 and ushered in a new culture of playwriting. People who had never before even written a play became fascinated by the atmosphere and impact of staged readings. The nature of the festival was such that yesterday you had an author sitting in front of a blank page, and today they could watch their text read by real actors in front of real audience members. And afterwards they could all discuss, argue and debate together.

You could even write about your own life and discover that somebody found it to be of interest. You could shock people. It became like a drug. But in the beginning, there was a deficit of topics in a way. The messages behind the texts felt, in some sense, inconsequential. The ‘relevance’ of it all seemed somehow irrelevant. Then, in 2013, everything changed with Maidan and the start of the war and the start of the war. We playwrights suddenly found ourselves at the epicentre of history. Everyone went through their own personal drama and was simultaneously a part of the collective drama. It was an incredible catalyst for creativity, the main message of which became – ‘We exist! We are here and now!’

We began to exist in every sense of the word – as a professional community, as an artistic movement, as citizens of influence and also as separate individuals. Demand for New Drama even arose in Ukraine’s old fossilized state theatres. Playwrights learned to talk about things that actually matter, and to draw upon personal experiences. We learned how to not avoid political topics and social processes, and in this way we grew into a community that could no longer be ignored. Dramatic texts were no longer seen simply as starting points for a director’s vision. They became recognized as self-sufficient works of art. In other words, there were two primary incubators for Ukrainian New Drama, first the festival and second the drama of real events in Ukraine.

It turns out that, of all the arts, theatre is the fastest to react to current events in society and almost instantly drew attention to certain kinds of processes. That’s why it made perfect sense that by 2020 Ukrainian playwrights created their own independent theatre, the Theatre of Playwrights, a group exclusively dedicated to producing new plays. The theatre was set to open on 12 March 2022. We managed to hold several pre-opening readings in our unrenovated venue, and we were deeply impressed by the size of our audiences and the obvious demand for a theatre like ours.

After the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, the official opening of the theatre was postponed. Our playwrights became scattered across the globe. Some remain in occupied cities. The previous eight years had hardened and united us. We continue existing, and writing plays that are now being translated, published and read all over the world. We are motivated to continue growing because we can see the impact and the resonance of a timely and skilfully composed text. We are preparing for the opening of our theatre, the next step in the development of Ukrainian playwriting.
In the past, we all dreamed of being seen as separate voices, because every author is an individual. We imagined competing with one another for the most premieres and awards, for recognition and reaching new artistic heights. We could never have imagined that our texts would be turned into soldiers on the cultural frontlines of Ukrainian independence and victory, or that we ourselves would become a kind of cultural front. I hope that after the victory, we will still have time to live in the vanity of literary life without having to think about saving our country. Some day.

Natalka Vorozhbyt

*Translated by Molly Flynn*
Biographies

Playwrights

Natalka Blok is a dramatist and screenwriter. Her plays have been staged in Ukraine at both state and independent theatre as well as abroad. Her texts have frequently been in the shortlists of prestigious international and Ukrainian competitions. Her work has been translated into Polish, Georgian, French, English, Romanian, German and other languages. She is a co-founder of the Theatre of Playwrights (Kyiv). She has written the screenplays for a number of films and TV series. In the spring of 2022, fleeing the war, she moved to Basel, where she continues to work.

Andrii Bondarenko is a playwright, journalist and humanities researcher with a PhD in Philosophy. He is a co-founder of Kyiv’s Theatre of Playwrights and participant in the Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings Project curated by John Freedman. Bondarenko currently works as a dramaturg at the Lviv Puppet Theatre. He is the author of numerous plays that have been shortlisted for major Ukrainian drama festivals and performed in theatres throughout Europe. Major productions include: Ultima Thule at Theatre Kolesa in Kyiv (2023), Lviv Tango at the Maria Zankovetska Theatre in Lviv (2022), Survivor Syndrome at HarMyDer Theatre in Lutsk (2022), The Light from Below: Stories from Ukrainian Basements at the Baron’s Court Theatre in London (2022) and Asshole at the Golden Gate Theatre in Kyiv (2020). Bondarenko is also the director of the short film A Night with Natalia (2017) which was screened at festivals in Kyiv and Prague.

Anastasiia Kosodii is a playwright, director and one of the co-founders of the Theatre of Playwrights in Kyiv. Before the full-scale Russian invasion, she often worked with NGOs in Eastern Ukraine in towns on the frontline of the war between Ukraine and Russia. Internationally, her work has been staged at the Maxim Gorki Theater (Berlin), Münchner Kammerspiele (Munich) and the Royal Court Theatre (London).

Maksym Kurochkin is a playwright, screenwriter and a driving force behind the founding of Ukraine’s Theatre of Playwrights. He was born in Kyiv and studied history at the Taras Shevchenko National University in Kyiv. His plays have been translated and produced at major theatres across Europe and North America. At the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022 he joined Ukraine’s territorial defence and he has since joined the military.

Lena Lagushonkova was born in 1984 into a family of engineers. She studied history at the Luhansk Taras Shevchenko National University and has worked in various fields. She moved to Kyiv at the start of the war in 2014 and made her debut as a playwright at the ‘Week of Contemporary Plays’ festival with her play Baza about women and prostitution. By 2022 more than ten of her plays had premiered in Ukrainian theatres including the cycle of plays about her hometown and its residents – PGT, The Mother by Gorky and My Banner was Pissed on by a Cat. In 2021 Lagushonkova was a Laureate of the ‘Aurora Festival’ (Bydgoszcz, Poland) and in 2022 she was awarded the European New Talent Drama Award (Stuttgart, Germany). Since 3 March 2022 she
has been living and working in Poland. She likes wine, cats and buns. She once fell into a canal in Venice.

**Olha Matsuipa** is a playwright, a theatre historian and a co-founder of the Theatre of Playwrights in Kyiv. Originally from Lviv, she graduated in Serbian philology from Ivan Franko National University of Lviv. From 2011 to 2016 she studied at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, where she received a PhD in Theatre and Literary Studies. In 2014, Matsuipa was an intern at the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Zagreb. In 2019, she received a scholarship from the ‘Gaude Polonia’ programme. Her plays have frequently been longlisted and shortlisted at the ‘Week of Contemporary Plays’ festival (Kyiv) and ‘Drama.UA’ (Lviv). In 2017, her play *Eco Ballad* was nominated in the ‘foreign drama’ category at the ‘Heidelberger Stückemarkt’ in Germany. Matsuipa’s plays have been staged in Rzeszow, Sosnovec, Khust, Lviv, Severodonetsk and Chernivtsi.

**Kateryna Penkova** is a playwright originally from Donetsk. She is a graduate of the Kyiv State Academy of Performance and Circus Arts with a degree in acting. Her texts explore the topics of Russia’s war in Ukraine, the occupation of Crimea, violence and sexual harassment, postcolonialism, gender and politics. Her plays have frequently been shortlisted for the ‘Drama.UA’ festival in Lviv and the ‘Week of Contemporary Plays’ festival in Kyiv. Her play *Pork* was among the winners of the 2020 ‘Transmission. UA: Drama on the Move’ playwrighting competition organized by the Ukrainian Institute. Kateryna is a co-founder of Ukraine’s Theatre and Playwrights and is currently based in Warsaw.

**Natalka Vorozhbyt** is a playwright, screenwriter and director. Her early play *Galka Motalko* was awarded the Eureka Prize in 2003 and her play *The Grain Store*, the first major play about Holodomor, was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2009. She is the co-founder of the Theatre of the Displaced in Kyiv and curator of Ukraine’s ‘Class Act: East–West’ project which ran from 2016 to 2018. Her 2017 play *Bad Roads*, first produced by the Royal Court, was later adapted into a film directed by the author and was chosen as Ukraine’s official Oscar selection in 2022. Other screenwriting credits include *Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die* (2017) and the screen adaptation of Serhiy Zhadan’s *Voroshilovgrad* entitled *The Wild Fields* (2018).

**Translators**

**Uilleam Blacker** is Associate Professor of Ukrainian and East European Studies at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London. His research focuses on cultural memory in east central Europe and on Ukraine’s diverse literary heritage. He is the author of *Memory, the City and the Legacy of World War II in East Central Europe: Ghosts of Others* (2019), co-author of *Remembering Katyn* (2012) and co-editor of *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe* (2013). He has published translations of Ukrainian authors in, among others, *The White Review, Words Without Borders* and *Modern Poetry in Translation*, as well as in several anthologies. His translation of Oleg Sentsov’s *Life Went on Anyway* was published in 2019.
Jack Clover is a director, writer, translator and a reporter for *The Sunday Times*. From 2017 to 2019, he worked with artists of the post-Euromaidan generation to create original work in government and independent theatres across Ukraine. His production *The Orchard* was staged at the Les Kurbas theatre in 2017. He also served as director in residence at the Zaporizhzhian New Drama independent theatre where he staged *Mars Is a Wonderful Place*, a satirical musical about emigration that toured to Kyiv, Kharkiv and Mariupol the following year. He subsequently founded the company Theatre in Two Weeks in 2018 and teamed up with the Theatre of Displaced People in Kyiv in December 2018 to curate the ‘Silence Isn’t Golden’ festival that saw playwrights Anastasiia Kosodii, Natalka Blok and Maksym Kurochkin create three fully formed performances with professional directors in just two weeks. In 2019, Clover directed the Ukrainian premiere of Kosodii’s *A Time Traveller’s Guide to Donbas* at the Lesia Ukrainka Theatre in Lviv and created, with Kosodii, the musical *Where I Will Remain* for Sumy’s National Schepkin Theatre: a piece that remains in repertoire and was last performed in September 2022 despite Russia’s full-scale invasion.

Sasha Dugdale is a poet and translator. Her translations include Natalka Vorozhbyt’s *The Grainstore* and *Bad Roads* for the Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal Court Theatre, and *In Memory of Memory* by Maria Stepanova, shortlisted for the International Booker Prize. Her most recent poetry collection *Deformations* was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize.

Daisy Gibbons is an award-winning translator from Ukrainian and Russian into English. Her literary translations include Tamara Duda’s Shevchenko Award-winning *Daughter* and short stories in anthologies *Love in Defiance of Pain: Ukrainian Stories* and *Voices of Freedom: Contemporary Writing from Ukraine*. Extracts of her work have appeared in *Harpers*, *Vanity Fair* and *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Gibbons attended the University of Cambridge and lived in Ukraine and Russia for several years. She now lives between London and Wiltshire.

Daisy Hayes is a director, translator, and script editor for BBC Studios in Cardiff. Her work in Ukraine includes several collaborations with the Theatre of Displaced People in 2016–17. Projects included performances and social initiatives at Gogolfest in 2016, and during the *Children and Soldiers* project in Sloviansk and Schastia in 2017. She also worked with theatre makers Dima Levitskyi and Piotr Armianovski, translating their audio tours around Kyiv into English. In December 2018, she directed Natalka Blok’s *Bomb* as part of the new-writing festival ‘Theatre in Two Weeks’ in Kyiv. In August 2019, she directed Natalka Blok’s *In the Darkness* as part of the ‘Batumi International Festival of One-Act Plays’.

Helena Kernan is a literary translator working from Ukrainian, Russian, French and German into English. Originally from London, she has lived in several European cities including Kyiv, where she worked with the Theatre of Displaced People and the Centre for Civil Liberties. She has been involved in multiple international projects focused on theatre, documentation, witness and historical memory, and is now based in Berlin. She holds master’s degrees in Slavic Studies from the University of Cambridge and the University of California, Berkeley. In recent years she has dedicated herself to studying and translating contemporary Ukrainian drama.
Rory Mullarkey is a playwright and translator of plays. His translations, including *Remembrance Day* by Aleksey Scherbak, *Pagans* by Anna Yablonskaya and *The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Chekhov, have been staged by the Royal Court Theatre, Bristol Old Vic and Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester. His original plays, including *Pity*, *Saint George and the Dragon*, *Each Slow Dusk*, *The Wolf from the Door* and *Cannibals*, have won multiple awards and have been produced across the UK and internationally.

Patrick Orme studied Philosophy and Modern Languages at Exeter College, Oxford from 2016 until 2020. From 2018 to 2019, he lived, worked and studied in Kyiv including working for the thinktank Collegium of Anna Yaroslavna, East. While in Kyiv he also began translating *A Time Traveller’s Guide to Donbas*. He wrote his dissertation on Soviet avant-garde theatre in the early twentieth century. Orme currently works as an advocate for housing and tenants’ advocacy charity Safer Renting in London.

Editor

Molly Flynn is a Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at Birkbeck, University of London. She is the author of *Witness Onstage: Documentary Theatre in Twenty-First-Century Russia* (2020). Molly has collaborated with Ukraine’s leading theatre-makers as a producer, curator, and translator. Her most recent research analyses socially engaged theatre practice in Ukraine since 2014. Her work has been published in journals such as *TDR: The Drama Review*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, *Open Democracy* and *Calvert Journal*. 
Take the Rubbish Out, Sasha

Natalka Vorozhbyt

Translated by Sasha Dugdale
Characters

Katya, aged fifty-five. Owns two food stalls by a metro station.

Oksana, aged thirty. Katya’s daughter. Worked as a manager in a shop in central Kyiv selling window blinds until she was seven months pregnant.

Sasha, aged fifty-five. Katya’s husband and Oksana’s stepfather. Colonel in the Ukrainian army. Until his death he was in charge of the physical training department at the military academy.
Scene One

Katya’s house, just outside Kyiv.

Katya and Oksana, both dressed in black, are making the filling for pies.

Oksana is seven months pregnant.

Sasha’s portrait on the windowsill – he is in military uniform.

A gas hob with all four burners alight.

A pan full of pie dough.

Katya You pour sunflower oil into the pan. And you chop the onion and the bacon fat, but finely, mind. By then the oil will be hot enough, spitting . . . Drop the onion and the fat in and fry them till transparent, then add a little bit of flour and brown it. Pinch of salt. You want it mixed in well. And that’s it. Ready for whatever you’re making.

Oksana Mmm . . . Remember it from when I was a kid. Can we have those tomorrow?

Katya No. For tomorrow we’ll have the plain ones, no fancy stuff. Meat and cabbage.

Oksana How many will there be?

Katya About sixty I’d say.

Oksana What if more people come?

Katya I’ve done a good few more. There’s plenty.

Oksana I’ll have a bit more herring.

Katya It won’t make you sick?

Oksana I’m dying of hunger.

Katya Go on then.

Eight different sorts of sweets are lying on the table.

A deep bowl of minced meat.

Batteries.

Chopped cabbage, a candlestick and a loaf of black bread.

A basket of biscuits, sellotape, a vase.

An old onion, quartered.

Scissors.

A plate of roughly sliced herring.

A bill for household charges.

Oksana eats herring, onion and bread hungrily.

Katya I can’t even look at food.
The saddest thing is that he won’t see Kolya. He really wanted to see Kolya.

If he’d wanted that, he wouldn’t have left us.

Oh, Mum . . .

If he’d wanted to see his grandson, he wouldn’t have left us.

I remember his reaction. When he found out. That it was a boy. That’s it, he said. No more women ruling the roost. It’ll be equal now.

Well, it won’t, it won’t be equal now.

Kolya won’t have a granddad. Not a dad, nor a granddad.

He’s got a dad.

Hardly much of one.

Why don’t you talk to him? Maybe he’ll come back. You’re the only one he’ll listen to.

What, Oleg?!

No, Sasha. Talk to him.

She’s right, you know. We really need you. Was there something missing for you?

No, nothing like that. Things were fine.

You wouldn’t have done it if things had been fine.

Done what?

How can he ask.

I heard him getting up. Five thirty, same as always, I wasn’t planning on getting up, I’d put his clothes out the night before. I hear him go into the bathroom, and from there there’s an almighty crash. I go in and he’s just lying there on the ground. His head like this . . . And he’s whispering something.

Now I don’t remember that . . .

He’s whispering something. He was still whispering. And I can’t bother her (meaning Oksana). Who am I going to ring? Even now makes me feel . . . The lot from the morgue turned up, they wrapped him in a carpet to carry him out. Never gave that carpet back . . . (To Oksana.) Put that fish away. It smells. Can’t stand it. (To Sasha.) How could you do it to me?

Shhh. You’ll spoil the dough.

They look at the rising dough and lower their voices.

We weren’t even having a row before it happened. It was all quiet. We went to bed.
Scene One

Oksana  You two had a row every day.
Katya   Oh, so I’m to blame, am I?
Oksana  You were always both to blame.
Sasha   True.
Katya   You were always on his side.
Sasha   She understood me.
Katya   Well, no one understood me . . . Not you, not her.
Oksana  Don’t involve me in this, alright.
Katya   Who’s involving you? You relax, you’re supposed to be keeping calm.

Oksana (finishes chopping cabbage)  The cabbage is ready. What now?
Katya   Put the sweets in those gift bags. Sixty bags. Put one of each in. There’s eight different sorts.

Oksana begins dividing up the eight different sorts of sweets: little toffees, boiled sweets, jellied fruit, soft-centred chocolates . . .

Sasha   Toffees, jellied fruit, boiled sweets . . .

Oksana (begins crying without warning)  You always used to hide them from him. The sweets.

Katya   He used to eat them all. He never used to leave any, behaved like he was the only one in the house. Didn’t matter how many you’d put out. He’d work his way through them. Drove me crazy.

Oksana  He was welcome to them.
Katya (to Sasha)  There you go! You come back, you can eat till you choke.
Sasha   What’s that supposed to mean?!
Oksana  He loved those plain toffees.
Sasha   Didn’t I earn enough to have myself a few toffees.
Katya   That’s all you did earn enough for. You weren’t wrong there. Paid in toffees you were.
Sasha   Well, now you’ll get my pension. Two thousand.
Katya   You should’ve dropped dead long ago. I’d be a rich woman by now.
Sasha   That’s not fair.
Oksana  You were curing him of the drink. Sweets were all he was allowed.
Katya   Stop howling and keep calm.

Oksana  The soup went off, and instead of chucking it out you boiled it and gave it to him for lunch.
Katya You’ve got a nerve. Sitting here and saying that.
Sasha Is that true?
Katya It’s not true.
Oksana We’d get the fresh meat, he’d get the day before yesterday’s.
Katya Well, was I supposed to throw it out?
Sasha Oh, Katya. You treated me like a dog. Was there ever any love?
Katya *(to Oksana)* Oh marvellous, he’ll be back before you can say the word!
Oksana Sasha. Come back.
Sasha Come back where? To my dog kennel?
Oksana I was joking about the soup. She hasn’t eaten anything for nine days now.
Sasha Katya, you must eat.
Katya I can’t. I feel sick.
Sasha Katya, sweetheart.
Katya My Sasha.
Sasha I can’t.
Katya Bastard. Selfish all his born days.
Oksana Mum. The dough.

*They look at the dough and fall silent.*

Katya Hobby, that’s what it was. Not a real job. Never earned anything in that army. Went off on trips to see his mates. Had his fun.
Oksana He was a soldier. An officer. A colonel.

Sasha *(timid)* An officer.
Katya *(mockingly)* ‘An officer’ . . . I was the bloody officer! My whole life was a battle. I fought for this place, for the Toyota, my two kiosks . . . So you could eat nice food and wear smart clothes . . . And what did I get? Fights with the tax people, the fire officers, competitors . . . Who’s the officer round here?!
Sasha Me. I was an officer in the Ukrainian army!
Katya What army?! Why? There hasn’t been a war since anyone can remember. Just a bunch of big men all pretending to do something. Lazy so-and-sos. No money, no glory – spoonfed by your wives like little babies . . . No wonder they all laughed at you, you deserved it.
Sasha Who?
Katya Oh, everyone. The ones in charge. You’re useless.
Sasha  It’s at home they laugh at me, no one laughs at me like you do.
Katya  Well . . . Go to your work then . . . You go and live at your work and they
can . . .
Oksana  Mum . . .
Katya  remembers he won’t be going to work again and stops in mid-flow.
Sasha  What?! What?!
Katya  Be quiet. You’re dead, aren’t you, so be quiet.
Sasha  Alright. I won’t say another word. That’s it.
Katya  (to Oksana)  Let’s move the table.
Oksana  What for?
Katya  Look where it is.

_They begin moving the heavy table. Sasha feels guilty._

Sasha  Girls, you shouldn’t.
Katya  (to Oksana)  Don’t go straining yourself. Just drag it.
Oksana  (grabs her belly)  Ow!
Katya  That’s enough. _(To Sasha.)_ See that?
Sasha  Well, what can I do?
Sasha  That’s not fair.
Katya  Not fair on who? What good was there in it? First ten years you drank. The next ten you were miserable. You never had a life. There’s nothing to look back on.
Sasha  Our holiday in Crimea?
Katya  brushes this off.
Katya  Never went abroad because you weren’t allowed.
Sasha  I was the USSR freestyle wrestling champion. You might be proud of that.
Katya  Proud of what? Couple of bent ears was all you got.
Sasha  All I got? You never could say a nice word about me.
Oksana  Sasha, I’ll say a nice word about you – is that allowed?
Katya  No! You were always his favourite anyway.
Oksana  We haven’t got enough for sixty gift bags.
Katya  Well, don’t put eight in each then. Put in six.
Take the Rubbish Out, Sasha

Oksana  Maybe we could buy some more?
Katya  I’m cleaned out as it is. Twenty-two thousand. And then there’s the gravestone.
Sasha  Oh, don’t bother with a stone. Put a cross there.
Katya  Oh, right. Right away. Did we forget to ask you?
Oksana  It would only be a couple of kilos of sweets.
Katya  Put six in each. That’s enough.
Oksana  Oh, it’s all the same to me . . .
Sasha  Where did you put my medals?
Katya  Where do you think I put them?! Who the hell wants medals for Soviet champions? The champions are gone and all we’re left with is the medals. Even the country’s disappeared. But the medals are still here. A fine inheritance I’ve been left by my officer-husband! Where can I sell scrap metal? How much is it going for? Nothing? I might have known. . .
Oksana  They’re in the wardrobe. Don’t worry.
Katya  You barely had a life, Sasha. Come back and finish it off. Get your pension and you won’t have to go to that bloody work. I won’t nag you. Have as many sweets as you can eat. We’ll take holidays in the country. And Egypt in the winter. The only reason I was worried about you retiring was that you’d get bored and start drinking. At work you had the illusion that you were serving someone, that there was some point to you. You kept yourself off the drink. But if you want you can have a drink. Just a little bit. Cheer you up. Bit of wine. Or whatever you want to drink. Even that homemade stuff Nina makes.
Sasha  What use am I to you?
Katya  Well, what am I without you?
Sasha  No one to irritate you.
Katya  You never irritated me.
Sasha  even begins laughing.
Sasha  You’d say anything when you need something.
Katya  What did I just say?
Sasha  I do understand. That I was the wrong man for you.
Katya  Oh no. You were the right man. I just didn’t see it.
Sasha  There’s no way back from here, don’t you see?
Katya  Well, I don’t believe it. It just suits you to say that.
Sasha  It’s not a work trip, Katya.