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“*Ha*l*t* is a play about a play that never happened.” Notes on *HA*L*T*

*Ha*l*t*. Directed by Tamara Trunova, Left Bank Theatre, Kyiv, Ukraine. Premiere: 8 March 2023. Running time: 1h 40 minutes. Fokus Ukraine – Europäisches Theaterfestival 777 Tage ДНІВ Days, Düsseldorf, Germany, 14 April 2024

Hamlet is halted, arrested in time, things fall apart, the centre would not hold. The Left Bank Theatre from Kyiv, known for their provocative and experimental productions, had to cancel their adaptation of *Hamlet* in light of the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022 when they were about to start rehearsing Shakespeare’s tragedy. In its place, Director Tamara Trunova created *HA*L*T*, a decimated, cut, bombed-out version of the play: Hamlet without “ME”. Hamlet’s doubts and reflections, his distancing and responsibility, directly influence the task that Ukrainian actors face when producing theatre in times of war. As such, *HA*L*T* becomes an adapted version of the impossible choices an individual has to face: “To be or not to be” (3.1.55). *Hamlet* becomes a Shakespeare Shelter, and it does not – “maybe we all dream”, asks Ophelia, “maybe we all dream of war”. As the war tears Ukraine apart, so too does Hamlet become dispersed, fragmented,

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deconstructed, inherently oppositional and dialectical. *Die Deutsche Bühne* confirms how “[t]he production impressively explores the speechlessness and nightmarish aspects of contemporary Ukraine”¹

Left Bank Theatre attended “Fokus Ukraine – Europäisches Theaterfestival 777 Tage ДНІВ Days” in Düsseldorf in April 2024 and staged *HA*L*T* on 14 April 2024. The Festival showed through theatre, workshops, and music how Ukrainians defend their country, culture, and independence. At this festival, the Dakh Daughters played to a full house, singing with their engaged audience “To Moyo More” / “That’s my sea” reclaiming their Ukraine; there was also an impressive and bitter contemporary version of *Oresteia*. In *HA*L*T*, Trunova’s limited cast displayed an intensive experience of destruction on a stage set that is simple, dark, and sometimes lit by blood-red light. The performance begins in a metadramatic discussion: the actors provoke, laugh in the face of death, contradict, and allude to military action. Via detours through cultural and political history, *Hamlet* is taken into the traumatic nightmares of everyday air raids, drone attacks, and the reality of a colleague on the frontline. The five actors show how literally some of Shakespeare might be taken in martial conditions: “Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, / And by opposing, end them? To die: to sleep” (3.1.58-59). The blood-red forest approaches towards the end. Danger is more prominent and urgent every single day.

Works Cited

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¹ Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the author.