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L_UKR_ECE at the Craiova International Shakespeare Festival, Romania, 2022

L_UKR_ECE, directed by Tania Shelepko, ProEnglish Theatre of Ukraine. Sound director and vocal coach: Olena Levchenko. Choreography: Tatiana Shelepko, Chrystyna Bila, Kateryna Hordiienko. International Shakespeare Festival in Craiova, 29 May 2022.

Teatrul Național MARIN SORESCU Craiova

This fringe project was designed and performed during the Shakespeare Festival in Craiova, Romania, in May-June 2022, at the Gdansk Shakespeare Festival, Poland, in July 2022, and at Pro.Act Fest in Kyiv, Ukraine, in August 2022,¹ which speaks to the strength and resolve of the creative team as well as the readiness of the European theatres and festivals to support one another in time of crisis.

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1 https://www.proenglishtheatre.com/l_ukr_ece/. Accessed 30 January 2026.



L_UKR_ECE was a focused 20-minute performance that became an account, both personal and collective, of rape as a wound and a weapon used to crush resistance: before 24 February 2014 when Lucius Tarquinius Superbus was exiled from the city of Rome, in between, and after 24 February 2022, when the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine started. These two diametrically opposed events, the ousting of the ancient Roman tyrant and the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, were juxtaposed in the video installation offered in lieu of a prologue. Drawing on William Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*, Tania Shelepko's mono-dramatic work empowered the voice of more than one individual. It became the voice of rape survivors that became amplified and embodied by Kateryna Hordiienko. Through dance, song and by invoking Shakespeare's poem as well as Ukrainian folk songs, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the poetry of Taras Shevchenko, Lesya Ukrainka, Christina Bila, and – most importantly – documented stories of women from the Kyiv and Kharkiv regions, the performance spoke out about the violence done to women who refuse to be silenced.

Wearing a simple, torn, white linen dress with a red top underneath, the dancer appeared on the empty stage and performed a dynamically choreographed dance to the sound of Dakha Brakha's *Vesna* [Spring], recorded on a variety of instruments, including an accordion and a cello. This, as well as *Dodecaphony* by the Ukrainian contemporary composer Vitaly Vyshnitsky, served throughout as a distinct aural counterpoint to the cruel objectification of the self, whose trauma was rendered present through the rhythm of the body moving on its own, in disharmony with the rhythm of the music and the verse. In fact, the choreography appeared at times like a violent biomechanical pantomime: the spasmodic body seemed to speak its truth kinetically. This startling effect was further strengthened by the fragmented form in which the poems and songs were delivered, either recited or sung live by Hordiienko, as if they were the shattered bits and pieces of the world before and after the traumatic event, initially narrated only through Shakespeare's verse. Once the actor started talking, her bold, sharp execution of Shakespeare's lines peeled off the veneer of time and pierced through the decorum of the text, which too often had been treated as a pretext for an ornate display of rhetorical acumen and acting skills. The advent of Tarquin was stripped in this way of all its décor; it became the coming of every rapist, whose insolence should not be rewarded with attention: it was, indeed, cut short. Hordiienko's own gestures, the songs of a once-happy girl who felt "sweet as honey," as well as passages from lyrical poetry, an air-raid alarm, and a video installation of war crimes in Ukraine, all worked against the beautiful form of Shakespearean verse. Profoundly ironic, harrowingly honest, and steadfast is the voice of a woman who has survived rape. As the video installation went dark, Hordiienko entered once again and, to end the production, very softly and calmly delivered lines from Lesya

Ukrainka's play *Forest Song*, spoken by the female character who, deeply wounded, transforms into a willow and finds solace in the beyond-her-self:

Ah, for that body do not sigh! [...]
Beside these waters shall a willow grow,
My end give life to something more robust.²

² Lesya Ukrainka. *Forest Song*. Translated by Percival Cundi. <https://www.l-ukrainka.name/en/Dramas/LisovaPisnja/Act3.html>. Accessed 30 January 2026.