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Afterword: IF Shakespeare UA. The First International Shakespeare Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine, 17–23 June 2024

A Ukrainian festival dedicated entirely to Shakespeare had been the stuff of dreams for the late Maiia Harbuziuk (Dean of Arts, University of Lviv) since 2018, following her participation in the Craiova International Shakespeare Festival in neighbouring Romania, and for Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi (Artistic Director of the National Academy Theatre of Music and Drama, Ivano Frankivsk). This ‘dream’ has been nurtured by Shakespeare scholars from Ukraine and abroad, and developed by the Ivano-Frankivsk Ivano Franko Theatre team, who refused to let the war already in motion halt their plans.¹ This first, successfully launched,

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1 <https://ifshakespeare.in.ua/en/festival-2024>. Accessed 25 October 2025.



edition enabled the Festival to join the European Shakespeare Festivals Network, a circuit of knowledge and cooperation among festivals in Europe (www.esfn.eu) with unprecedented swiftness: the live ESFN's council meeting confirmed Ukraine's membership 24 hours after the Festival's start.

The Festival's programme was aimed at Ukrainian audiences – save for the very few international festivalgoers making the journey into the war-locked country. It featured performances by leading Ukrainian theatres from across Ukraine, as well as international productions from Italy, Moldova and Poland. Additionally, it offered public lectures, interviews, workshops, and roundtables with academics and art specialists from various Ukrainian universities and cultural institutions, alongside guests from Bulgaria, Ireland, Poland, Romania and the UK.

The main Festival venue was the Ivano-Frankivsk National Academy of Music and Drama Theatre named after Ivan Franko, a cultural landmark situated in the centre of Ivano-Frankivsk, western Ukraine, and the first theatre to reopen under shelling in April 2022. The location choice was deliberate: one of the major cities in western Ukraine, Ivano-Frankivsk boasts a rich multicultural history and is positioned within relatively easy reach from major European cities. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its location away from the frontline provided a reassuring degree of security that the Festival team, under the steady directorship of Rostyslav Derzhypil'skyi (director of the Ivano-Frankivsk Theatre) and Iryna Chuzhynova (festival director and curator), made their priority. While it has been impossible to fly to Ukraine since February 2022, most creatives and international guests resorted to travelling to a neighbouring country and taking a coach or train to the Festival destination.

The theatre itself is housed in a sizeable brutalist building that functions as a versatile hub for the performing arts in the city. The main stage alone features a 14-metre-diameter revolving platform and a spacious auditorium with comfortable seating and excellent acoustics.² During the Festival, it was mainly used for guest performances from other regions of Ukraine and from abroad. The latter, renamed Stage Basement, had served as an air-raid shelter since 2022 and was, therefore, already adapted to accommodate large groups.

The Festival commenced with a staging of *Coriolanus*, directed by Dmytro Bohomazov and featuring a complex modern set design by Petro Bohomazov, with clear allusions to Rome as a coastal city by nearer shores. Presented by the Ivan Franko National Academy Drama Theatre in Kyiv, this modern production set a vibrant tone for the event. The interpretation of Shakespeare's Roman play was explicitly political and revisited questions of sovereignty and tyranny in a manner that struck an obvious chord with the audience. *Coriolanus* (Dmytro Rybalevski)

² The building houses several other stages, rehearsal spaces and some sizeable workshops that make the production sets, props and costumes.

was imagined as a noble warrior, whose wartime experiences had visibly transformed him; this rendered him incomprehensible to the Roman plebeians, portrayed unflatteringly as the Soviet-like, dangerous, rebellious rabble, sometime comical, sometime Grand Guignol sinister. A transparent screen, made of several door-size panes, separated Rome from the city of Corioles, where the Volscis dwelled – a motley crew sporting Punk-Goth hairdos, an array of black outfits of leather and buckles, and combat boots. It was on this screen that they spelled, in blood, MORI as they prepared to take on Rome; on the same screen, quiet Virgilia made the production's most powerful plea: as she made her exit through the screen doors, she rewrote the entire story by turning the bloody message to AMORI.

The unsettling engagement with the repercussions of political conflicts, set in a post-apocalyptic scenario, was also evident in Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi's imaginative retelling of *Hamlet*, in which Ophelia, Laertes, and the young Prince wandered around the air-raid shelter like abandoned children trying to make sense of the harsh world of adults who forced them to grow up too quickly. Hamlet, performed with energy and bravado by Oleksii Hnatkovskyi, was visibly evolving into a mature and resolved revolutionary, whose choice 'to be' carried not only personal but national consequences. All was performed to live music by the orchestra and witnessed by the three Weird Sisters, who observed the *neo-opera-horror*, having opened it like chthonic priestesses from the underworld, sent to awaken the spirits of the dead so they could perform the play as their penance.

The same 'stage basement' – as staff and spectators now call the space – served as the venue for the second production in the diptych by Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi. *Romeo & Juliet – drama per musica* was a spectacular, imaginative retelling of the story by the ensemble of the Ivano-Frankivsk National Academy of Music and Drama Theatre. It was constructed around strong contrasts: on the one hand, it juxtaposed the operatic-like aesthetic of Romeo and Juliet's love with the brutality of young men duelling, both trapped in a MMA (mixed martial arts) cage. On the other hand, it set the story of the 'star-crossed lovers' in two parts to music, which the live orchestra signalled by alternating the brass funeral marches, redolent of Prokofiev, with local folk-like music. While the basement was initially used for the tomb (in contrast to the derelict Soviet plant where part 1 took place, when the production opened, in 2017), after February 2022, it became the city centre's designated bomb shelter and one of the theatre's two functional stages during air raids. This was a literal descent into the underworld, considering the audience was led into the theatre's basement – which continues to double as the designated bomb shelter in the city centre. Once the basement was repurposed by Yliia Zaulychna, the space was used creatively to convey a sense of audience immersion in the unfolding events. The concrete slabs on wheels (which in *Hamlet* served as makeshift biers from which the characters were raised by the Weird Sisters' invocation) once again became beds, this time for the Capulets, who initially slept

beneath thermal blankets to wake up to a feast, during which the Nurse (Olha Komanovska) was sharing drinks with the audience. The large oven-like structure (centre right) became a temporary stage from which Mercutio (the terrific Ivan Blindar) bellowed his half-crazed Queen Mab rap. The duel between Tybalt and Mercutio, imagined as an MMA judo/Brazilian jiu-jitsu cage match, involved the audience as party-goers again, and the cage-like structure that separated Romeo and Juliet from the violence and from the viewers created a sense of entrapment that was difficult to shake. The production, which had the PTSD-raving Friar Lawrence double as the sober Duke (judge, jury and executioner), ended exactly where it had begun, with dying Romeo in Juliet's lap, a white Pieta inside the wire cage that was gradually obscured by the dark, looming bodies of the quick and the dead in this Verona. This was a powerful reminder of the war outside that continues to sacrifice the young generation.

The last show to take place in the basement was Oksana Dmitriyeva's heart-breaking *The Tempest*, produced by Mariya Zankovetska, Lviv National Academic Theatre (Lviv). This production opened with a grand storm contrived in a realistic fashion with water, light, smoke (revealed to be Ariel's walking around and sprinkling the outcasts from his portable water tank) and the audience's vocal participation under Prospero's close instruction. Prospero (the superb Oleh Stefan) was portrayed as a frail patriarch and a seductive master of words, entrapped on an island that did, in fact, feel and look like a prison. Red metallic cages, heaps of leftover shoes and ancient horns of primaeval rhinoceroses dominated Mikhail Nikolaev's red and white scenography, and created an image of a gruesome past and an even more desolate present, signified also by the large toy-like, oversized Ionescean rhinoceros (made of leftover materials it repurposed – an oil tank, springs, wood, metal net). The rhinoceros, as well as many leftover rhinoceros horns, were used as an element of the island and served as a playground to Miranda and Ferdinand. Caliban also played with the rhino, hiding within it, moving around it, and Prospero finally used it as a large furnace to devour the heaps and heaps of galoshes signifying all those once stranded on the island's forlorn shores – a sinister reminder of an extermination camp. Stefan's Prospero navigated this metallic hell with weary authority, his dark navy and red captain uniform contrasting with both Ariel's white ethereal pilot outfit (Yaroslav Derpak) and Caliban's peasant-like overalls (Volodymyr Pantelev). Strengthening the sense of entrapment visually, all the outcasts were dressed in red-and-white striped onesies; these were no pyjamas, but resembled concentration camp outfits as well as naval military underwear. On the one hand, the overall visual effect was colourful and childlike, and the sense of abandon was created through the object-play with the props: the white horns were used as toys but also acquired sexual significance when handled by Miranda and Ferdinand, as well as Ariel who in a spectacular tableau visualised Sycorax, complete with breasts and horns to accompany Prospero's narrative. On the other

hand, they were symbols of power that identified the position of the shipwrecked in the pecking order: Alonso, the King of Naples, sported a larger horn, while his brother Sebastian and Antonio, the Duke of Milan, had smaller ones. Language and silence were instruments of oppression which Prospero used repeatedly both on the characters (not just of Caliban, but on Ariel and Ferdinand too, when telling him to continue his proposal speech as he's been instructed) and on the audience, whom he charmed into doing his bidding at the beginning – that is, to create the storm sounds –, then terrified with his authoritarian behaviour towards his own child and Ariel, and with the burning of galoshes, the only evidence that made the island a massacre site. Imaginative, dense with theatrical allusions, and politically astute, Dmitrieva's work was something rich and strange.

The Ivano-Frankivsk Festival provided space for young Ukrainian actors in training to showcase their work and perform for large audiences. On June 21, the viewers could attend *Hamlet*, directed by Olha Larina and Denys Martynov, with costume design by Liliya Lutsenko. This production, staged on the Studio Stage of the Ivano-Frankivsk National Academy, showcased the energy and enthusiasm of young performers from the Kyiv Academic Theatre in Pechersk. The following day, on June 22, the same venue hosted *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Andriy Bilous, performed by the talented students of the Kyiv National Academic Young Theatre, who had previously toured the York International Shakespeare Festival in the UK and competed at the Gdańsk International Shakespeare Festival in Poland, where they received the Polish Shakespeare Association award, 'Prospero's Book'. The production blended contemporary youth street culture – evident in the lovers' humorous exchanges and in Helena and Hermia's rap battle – that infused modern energy and rhythm into the comedy, with folk traditions visible in the elements of costume, choreography, set design, and the witty inclusion of *vyshyvanka* dolls (guardians of heritage and family) in the mechanicals' scene, adding a cultural storytelling layer to the very witty whole. The last production was *A Date with William*, performed by first-year students of Ivano-Frankivsk Theatre Academy. Sourced from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the études were linked by *Greensleeves*, which was performed live as a refrain by the actors who played their chosen instruments.

The first international production in the Festival was a large-scale theatrical event by Teatrul Fără Nume (Chişinău, Moldova), which intertextualised *Macbeth* with Romanian folk culture and Eugene Ionesco's *Macbett*. The radical message about the eternal cycle of violence, where one despot is defeated only to be replaced by an even worse tyrant, was visible in the choices made by the director Mihai Țărnă: the Scottish play was bookended by Ionesco's *Macbett*, and it was Ionesco's vision of Shakespeare's play that carried the tenor of the performance. The grotesqueness of power feeding on itself was discernible from the very start, when the actors, whose heads showed through the curtain at varying heights, bellowed their parts.

The gratuitous violence of the theatre of absurd – and of the world outside – clashed strongly with the interweaving love story of Macbeth and his wife, a bare-footed shepherdess sent by her mother to ‘herd the goats’ (a well-known Romanian carol). Their airy ballet on ropes temporarily lifted them above the water, earth, blood, and death down below, only to make their fall more dramatic. The strip of land, stage-fore, no longer able to contain the dead who lost their lives defending it, could not have been a more powerful reminder of the reality outside the theatre: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine *and* its neighbour to the west, Moldova, in its own precarious position and long history of being claimed by Russia.

The political impact of the war also surfaced, this time quite indirectly, in a monodramatic piece with a media twist by two talented actors from the Adam Zelwerowicz Theatrical Academy in Warsaw (Poland). In *Matulka* [Mumsie], written and performed by Julia Bukała (a graduate of both the Kyiv and Warsaw theatrical schools), young Julka grappled with her mother’s decision to leave the country and move to Italy. The absent, abusive, and emotionally detached mother controlled Julka by leaving her completely alone at home and keeping her under lock and key. In this highly modern retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*, the ‘star-crossed lovers’ were already an item; there was no feud between their families, and yet still they had no future together. The main focus was on Julka, who, in her isolation, became increasingly alienated, even though her house arrest was occasionally interrupted by FaceTime calls from her friends, including her boyfriend (Artur Zudzin-Wiśniewski). Unable to influence the outside world, she could only watch in disbelief as a wild party spirals out of control, costing her the lives of her cousin and Romek (Roman), who, in a metatheatrical nod, was addressed as ‘Romeo’ by Julka’s cousin Tymek (Tymon – Tybalt). When Julka received a message from her mother about a fatal car accident, she suspected the worst and acted accordingly. The concise language of youth speak, as well as the sharp localisation of the production in the “now,” resonated especially with younger audience members, while older viewers seemed preoccupied with how Julka’s relationship with her mother unravelled. When Adam Zudzin-Wiśniewski joined Julia Bukała after the performance for the standing ovation, everyone was genuinely surprised – not expecting the ‘Romeo’ to be more than a smartphone presence. When, amid the general disbelief, he knelt and took out an engagement ring to propose to Julia Bukała, she herself seemed not entirely sure whether it was part of the performance or a genuine marriage proposal, which she accepted, to the viewers’ tears, thereby transforming them into moved witnesses. Thus, the first Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival became one of the very few Shakespeare festivals in the world where Juliet got her happy ending and a promise of a bright future, for which we keep our fingers crossed.

The Festival concluded with *Hamlet Double Bill*, written, directed, and performed by actors Adrian Hughes, Alberto Ierardi, and Giorgio Vierda from La

Ribalta Theatre (Italy) and the English Theatre Company (UK). The production was staged in Ivano-Frankivsk as part of their tour of European Shakespeare festivals, having won the 2024 ‘ShakeSphere’ competition organised annually by the European Shakespeare Festivals Network (<https://esfn.eu/shakesphere-call-for-projects/>). This was also a story in two parts: the first was a comic retelling of Hamlet from the perspective of the Gravediggers, tasked with burying all the dead once Hamlet’s revenge was over; the second was a more interactive segment focusing on *The Mousetrap* and the discussion over Claudius’s guilty conscience and Ophelia’s tragedy. Its comic slant and the interaction elicited by the performers (with the help of puppets on sticks for Claudius and Gertrude) provided the much-needed respite for all spectators at the end of the Festival and before returning to their daily reality.

Another highlight of the Festival was the comprehensive educational and academic programme held across multiple city venues, including the post-industrial space known as Promprylad, a bustling resilience centre for culture and business. The programme featured various formats in which academics from the European Shakespearean Research Association networked together with theatre critics and scholars from academic, educational and cultural institutions across Ukraine. The academic programme began with a public lecture titled “Who needs another Shakespeare Festival?” by Nicoleta Cinpoș (Professor of Shakespeare Studies at the University of Worcester, UK, and keen lobbyist for the Ivano-Frankivsk Shakespeare Festival). Later that day, the Ukrainian Shakespeare Festival and the European Shakespeare Festivals Network were officially introduced in the historic hall of the Bastion Gallery. Speakers included Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi, Philip Parr, Nicoleta Cinpoș, Michael Dobson, Iryna Chuzhynova, Ema Vyroubalova, Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik, in person, and leading members from other festivals who joined online: Joanna Śnieżko (Gdansk), Vlad Drăgulescu (Craiova) and representatives of the newly returned festival initiative in Barcelona. Another event, open to the public, took place at the counter-cultural art space of the Vagabundo club, where Daria Moskvitina (Zaporizhzhia State Medical and Pharmaceutical University) interviewed Yurii Andrukhovych, the local icon and one of the rock-stars of the European literary and translation world.

The 19 June continued to focus on translation, with panels on Ukrainian Shakespeare and the Modern Stage with Bohdan Korneliuk (Khortytsia National Educational and Rehabilitation Academy), the European experience of Shakespeare’s theatrical translations with Daria Moskvitina and Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik (University of Lodz), and a roundtable on subtitling Shakespearean translations for stage productions featuring Viktoriia Marinesko, Yevheniia Kanchura (Zhytomyr Polytechnic State University), Sorin Cazacu (University of Craiova) and Nataliia Krynytska. The day concluded with a tour-de-force discussion on the theatricality of Shakespeare’s Ukrainian translations, with

two keynote speakers: Nataliya Torkut (Ukrainian Inter-University Shakespeare Centre, Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the Shakespeare Institute of the University of Birmingham) and Lada Kolomiyets (Visiting Professor at Dartmouth College, USA).

The third day was organised around the visual arts. Michael Dobson (Director of the Shakespeare Institute, UK) delivered a public lecture titled “Shakespeare and Art,” followed by a discussion of Shakespeare’s Word in Illustrations by the renowned Ukrainian artist Vladyslav Yerko. Yerko’s art displayed in the theatre foyer enabled audiences and visitors to engage with the topic throughout the Festival. The discussion, moderated by Nataliya Torkut, included Darya Lazarenko from the New University in Sofia, Bulgaria. A panel titled “Shakespeare’s theatrical showbills and posters: advertising or art?” featured Darya Lazarenko, too, as well as postgraduate students Yana Nikityuk (Italy) and Svitlana Deineka (Taras Shevchenko Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine), along with an online presentation on poster art by Sabina Laskowska-Hinz (Polish Shakespeare Association). The day’s academic events concluded with a presentation on the virtual *museum #Hamlet-UA: act I, scene 1943*. Speakers for this session included academics who worked on the project: Professor Nataliya Torkut, Roman Lavrentiy (Associate Professor at Ivan Franko Lviv National University) and Maksym Brychka, a graduate student at Volodymyr Vynnychenko Central Ukrainian State University.

The following two days featured roundtables discussing the state of Ukrainian performing arts and changes in the Ukrainian theatre scene. On 21 June, the theatre foyer hosted a panel titled “War and Shakespeare”, moderated by the Festival programme director Iryna Chuzhynova, which explored fundamental questions about the ongoing war and how festival-making can remain meaningful during crises. The discussion at the Promprylad conference hall on drama therapy and the Heartbeat method by Kelly Hunter focused on the role of contemporary theatre as a therapeutic tool. Later that day, the Festival featured the panel “Ukrainian Shakespeare – local or universal?” moderated again by Ira Chuzhynova. The day ended with presentations of two recent publications: the collective monograph: *Shakespeare in Ukrainian on the Other Side of the Iron Curtain*, edited M.R. Stech, and a literary translation of Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* by Yevheniya Kanchura, published by Vivat Publishing House.

With its elegant foyer, contemporary stage, warm and inviting ambience, and a dedicated, professional Festival team, the theatre in Ivano-Frankivsk was more than prepared to host the 1st International Shakespeare Festival in Ukraine. During the event, it was transformed tangibly from a regular hub of intellectual life and a venue for performances for the local audiences into a vibrant gathering place for cultural events and community engagement that clearly moved beyond the regional. It became a festival hub where the general public, creatives, theatre

workers, specialists, and scholars came to engage in meaningful dialogue, and a platform for discussing the cultural importance of theatre and art in the time of global crisis and their role in the ordeal Ukraine has been facing. The general atmosphere was very sombre at first. As the Festival declared on its digital platform, this was no 'art holiday from the war'. The representation at the formal opening, which comprised of local and regional authorities, as well as cultural representatives of the President's office, businesses that sponsored the event, the British Ambassador, the press, Ukrainian creatives travelling from eastern cities devastated by the war or from exile abroad, confirmed the key role that theatre and this Shakespeare Festival play on the home-frontline, both shelter for its community and guardian of Ukrainian identity.

Throughout the festival, Nicoleta Cinpoes, Philip Parr, and Michael Dobson reflected on the history of creating Shakespeare festivals during times of crisis. The First International Shakespeare Festival in Ukraine served as a vivid testament to the power of the human(e) spirit even in the darkest hours. By providing a platform to showcase diverse Ukrainian Shakespeare performances and international productions, the Festival highlighted Ukraine's unequivocal presence in Europe but also the ongoing struggle of the Ukrainian military and civilians alike to preserve the values of the democratic world. Hosting international productions and joining the European Shakespeare Festivals Network brought attention to Ivano-Frankivsk as a prominent destination on the global artistic map. Creating opportunities for young actors to shine emphasised the importance of nurturing future talent. All of this was, quite impossibly, achieved by the Ivano-Frankivsk Academy of Music and Drama Theatre after Ivan Franko amidst war.

Final Thoughts from the Reviewers

Anna Kowalcze-Pawlik: My visit to Ivano-Frankivsk was a profoundly transformative experience on a very personal level, which goes beyond this writing. I knew that by attending the Festival, I would, in some ways, confront the difficult heritage which still shadows the political relations between our two neighbouring countries, and which is the result of the centuries-long entanglement of our societies in Russia's imperial projects. Though I had friends in Ukraine, I had never ventured there, weighed down by that burden. I now see that while the ghosts of the past may haunt us, they belong to history; the present is the time when we all need friendship, love, and care more than anything else. Indeed, friendship, love and care are what I felt, what I witnessed and what I will carry with me into the future – not as a burden, but as a treasure. The Festival's opening was imbued with solemnity and gravity, as it opened a time of collective reflection on the most fundamental of issues: 'to be or not to be' that resounded with much emotion, on

and off the stage. Throughout the Festival week, it was repeated as a sonorous ‘to be’ with conviction and hope for the future of the Ukrainian theatre and society. At its closing, the Festival overflowed with joy and gratitude at having witnessed something so breathtaking and so beautiful. More than anything else, I felt that this Festival was about people and their stories, understanding their wounds, and offering respite. It performed splendidly and formidably in the most fundamental task you can ask from theatre: to stir thought, to awaken empathy, and to transform us, possibly into better human beings.

Nicoleta Cinpoș: Shakespeare is often discussed in terms of ‘soft power’; there was nothing soft about the Shakespeare made, witnessed and discussed at the 1st edition of the Ivano-Frankivsk International Shakespeare Festival in Ukraine. As the Festival posters and billboards invited us to see it, IF SHAKESPEARE UA stood for Ivano-Frankivsk Shakespeare Ukraine. Yes, that’s what I initially thought, too – a rich programme for what the team was suggesting the ‘DEMO’ festival Rostyslav Derzhypilskyi promised back in August 2023, in Gdansk, where the event was ‘cooked’. But in true Ivano-Frankivsk style, and as the productions reviewed above intimate, the poster title and graphics burst with provocations, symbols, promises, boundless energy, exactly what one should expect – and we experienced aplenty – not just of Shakespeare in Ukraine but, as the poster teased us, IF SHAKESPEARE [is] UKRAINE. Shakespeare is Ukraine, and has certainly been for a good while, especially in Ivano Frankivsk. It is the rest of the world that is in urgent need to wake up from its ‘fearful slumber’. There is much catching-up work to do for all of us, Shakespeare scholars and academics. Like Shakestivallers in Ukraine, back in 2024, and like the curators of this volume, we could not be ‘mutes’ or ‘audiences to this act’. As we live – though pale and trembling at ‘this chance’, we took up the task Hamlet bestows on Horatio: ‘report me and my causes right’.