

The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

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Upbeat Fantasies Coming to Life on the Kyiv Stage

Kyiv's Theater "On the Wheel" in the historic Podil' district has been bringing dreams to life through the magic of the stage for nearly four decades. Its look at Ukrainian-Jewish relations provides a glimpse at the inter-ethnic camaraderie Kyiv and Ukraine will need to move forward after the war.

Spring 1988 must have felt as a time of both peril and promise to young Ukrainians. The Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant had exploded just two years before and CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's intentions remained uncertain. Was an unprecedented opening possible? Or, as many argued at the time, were his reforms only a ruse to draw out the disgruntled for later retribution? Were the rumblings emanating from Moscow the sound of the Soviet Union crumbling? Or just a minor disruption before Soviet authorities reasserted their hegemony? How could anyone know?

Young actor and aspiring director Iryna Klishchevska graduated from the National University of Theater, Cinema, and Television seven years before at the height of Brezhnevian stagnation. She must have sensed that she was unlikely to fulfill her dreams if she played by the old Soviet rulebook. She leapt into a future that had barely taken shape and opened a small dramatic company, Kyiv's Theater "On the Wheel." [Her now celebrated theater recently celebrated its thirty-eighth anniversary](#), with many more likely to follow.

Klishchevska set up her theater in a turn-of-the-century mansion that the Soviets had converted into communal apartments housing several families in miserable conditions. She and her colleagues recognized that the building's more distant past as the property of jeweler Vasily Chernyavsky hid a grandeur that offered an uncommon opportunity. Located at the foot of the famous Andreyevsky Usviz (Andrew's Incline) in two buildings dating from 1885 and 1902, the theater was perfectly located to attract playgoers. Even more so as the Usviz soon became the city's busiest tourist market selling art, souvenirs, and *chotchkes*.

Her company carved out four chamber theaters, and a café perfect for hosting the modern Ukrainian and unknown foreign dramas that were becoming possible as Soviet-era strictures melted away. The repertoire grew to include dramas, tragedies, comedies, musicals, vaudeville, farces, detective stories, melodramas, documentary dramas and plays for children. Klishchevska offered something to expand the horizons of every aspiring actor and audience member.

Klishchevska and her company continued to grow and to gain recognition throughout Ukraine and Europe. In 2008, the theater added the honorific "Academic" to its title; a year later, she was awarded the title People's Artist of Ukraine. Internationally, the company toured widely, gaining praise and financial support for its distinctive brand of theater.

The company's success remains rooted in Kyiv. As celebrated Bulgarian actor and director Yavor Binev [explained to the British Council](#), what happens in the audience proves to be as important as what transpires on stage. "In Ukraine, the audience reacts to what is happening on the theatrical stage like something it encounters everyday... The audience is also quite active, showing its attitude but not interfering. On the contrary, if a certain sense of ease prevailed, then the audience assisted the actors maintain it."

Klishchevska and her colleagues encouraged this connection with their audiences by reaching out to the neighborhood and integrating the theater into the city's daily life. They welcomed neighborhood children, some of whom later joined the company. The community returned its support as it evolved throughout the tumultuous years following Ukrainian independence. The theater thrived throughout the economic and political turmoil of the 1990s and 2000s and survived the coronavirus shutdowns and the current brutal war with Russia.

Despite these travails, the theater presently has 51 on its rolls including 21 actors, supporting a repertoire including 38 works. In the days following this year's anniversary the company staged comedies and Broadway musicals, a solo work honoring the French *chanteur* Charles Aznavour, and the premier of a new work developed in collaboration with the displaced Kherson Regional Academic Music and Drama Theater. One of the works in repertoire – *In Kiev, On Podil'.... Or, where do you dry your underwear?* – celebrates the neighborhood's multicultural legacy. The warm-hearted cast sings Jewish and Ukrainian songs, laughs at common jokes, and shares Jewish recipes. By looking back with humor at the often tortured and lethal past of Ukrainian and Jewish relations, this tale projects an inter-ethnic camaraderie that will be required as Ukraine tries to rebuild after this war. The continuing success of Klishchevska's theater demonstrates that such optimistic fantasies can become realities.

