

# The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

Written by **BLAIR A RUBLE**

## Finding Ukraine On London's Fringe

Devotees of London's Fringe theater scene had more opportunity to view contemporary Ukrainian plays this past winter as Polina Pologenceva's [\*A Fan of War\*](#) played at the Camden People's Theatre in February, followed by Marina Smilianets's [\*Borscht. Great-Grandmas' Recipes for Survival\*](#) a month later at the Drayton Arms Theatre. Both productions added to a growing Ukrainian presence in London's theatreland, which has included acclaimed productions of Polina Pologenceva and Andriy Bondarekno's *The Light from Below: Stories from Ukrainian Basements* at Barons Court Theatre as well as of Inna Goncharova's [\*The Trumpeter\*](#) and [\*Neda Nejdana's Pussycat in Memory of Darkness\*](#) at the Finborough Theatre.

Pologenceva's *A Fan of War* captures a quotidian moment in the life of Yasa, a Ukrainian woman living in the UK. Yasa has become wedged between her French boyfriend in London's Molesay district, and her elderly mother stuck in a village under attack in Zaporizhia. Her mom (who constantly calls at inopportune moments) and her mom's neighbor need to talk about the assault taking place around them. Her French boyfriend tires of hearing about these conversations, leading to Yasa's sardonic confession that she must be a fan of war because she can't stop talking about it. He then proceeds to ghost her, never calling back.

Camden People's Theatre (CPT) proved an appropriate venue for Pologenceva's work. Known as a space available to the theater-makers of tomorrow, CPT celebrates a concept of community that transcends class and ethnicity. These lofty goals have cultivated passionate audiences who generate an at times raucous atmosphere that approximates turbulent Elizabethan traditions more than the staid patrons of mainline West End productions. Pologenceva's *A Fan of War* fit right into this Camden scene.

Bogdana Kalantay led the Camden production as Yasa. Born in Kyiv and raised in Munich, Kalantay has enjoyed a steady presence on the British stage, film, and television. Beginning her acting career as a child—and now a writer as well in her early thirties—Pologenceva and director Anastasia Toros are part of a post-independence generation transforming Ukrainian theater. The *Borscht* creative team of playwright Smilianets and director Kifa are likewise part of that emerging group.

**"For Pologenceva, war constitutes the ultimate human encounter. For Smilianets, borscht soup represents a quintessentially Ukrainian dish symbolizing home, coziness, traditions, and indomitability. For London theatergoers, their works offer profound insights into the human condition."**

Smilianets' homage to the glories of comfort food seemed particularly appropriate for the Drayton Arms. The historic Victorian-era pub became a gathering place for actors following World War II when the BBC opened a rehearsal space upstairs. The pub's connection to theater continued when the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art took over the

rehearsal room, which eventually was converted to a public theater in 2010. The Drayton Arms offers an upgraded selection of traditional pub comfort fare on its pre-theater menu (though it lacks great grandma's borscht).

Smilianets, who was born less than a year after Ukrainian independence, has emerged as a bright figure within the Ukrainian theater scene. Trained at leading theater centers, she has enjoyed success on stage and television. Her articles and reviews earned her widespread praise, while Ukrainian theaters have staged over a dozen of her plays since 2020. Her plays such as *Borscht*, *Cat Refugees*, and *Prayer for Elvis* combine youthful verve with sly ironic humor.

Odesa-born, Barcelona-based Iryna Kifa directed and produced the Drayton Arms performances. Kifa pursued rhythmic gymnastics, acrobatics, and dance as a child before turning to the theater. Just a year older than Smilianets, Kifa has brought new energy and an Odesan love of free creativity to the Ukrainian stage both as a performer and as a director. Both Smilianets and Kifa personify a rising generation committed to strengthening Ukrainian theater.

Pologenceva, Kalantay, Toros, Smilianets, and Kifa represent new Ukrainian theater-makers who speak to universal truths while addressing life's—and war's—personal traumas. For Pologenceva, war constitutes the ultimate human encounter. For Smilianets, borscht soup represents a quintessentially Ukrainian dish symbolizing home, coziness, traditions, and indomitability. For London theatergoers, their works offer profound insights into the human condition.

