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THE CONCEPTS OF *DYING* AND *DEATH* IN UKRAINIAN DRAMA ABOUT THE FULL-SCALE WAR OF 2022-2024: BASIC MODELS AND TEXTUAL STRATEGIES

Abstract. *The article deals with interpretations of the largest war in the modern world, proposed by contemporary Ukrainian non-combatant playwrights after 24 February 2022. Three basic models of the conceptual field of dying and death have been identified: the eternal battle between Good and Evil, the totality of war as initiation, and new rites of passage. Within each model, three major textual strategies have been analysed based on examples of contemporary plays about the war, covering various general cultural aspects of the artistic interpretation of the war through the writers' comprehension of dying and death: the opposition between Ukrainian vitality and Russian mortality as Good and Evil; metamorphosis of the body in the context of the war; the impossibility of observing burial rites under the conditions of war; cataloguing of Russian war crimes; transformation of the victim status; conscious and spontaneous resistance to aggression; design of new rituals of transition; transfer of ordeals from the postmortem to the zone of death's anticipation; opening of portals between worlds.*

Keywords: *war drama, dying, death, cultural model, textual strategies*

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КОНЦЕПЦИИ ЗА УМИРАНЕТО И СМЪРТТА В УКРАИНСКАТА ДРАМАТУРГИЯ ЗА ПЪЛНОМАЩАБНАТА ВОЙНА ОТ 2022 – 2024 г.: ОСНОВНИ МОДЕЛИ И ТЕКСТОВИ СТРАТЕГИИ

Резюме. *Статията коментира как украински драматурзи, които не са преки участници в бойните действия, интерпретират в пиесите си най-мащабната съвременна война. Разгледани са три основни репрезентативни типологии – войната като превъплъщение на вечната битка между Доброто и Злото; като акт на инициация; като ритуал на прехода от живот към смърт. Анализирани са общокултурните аспекти в художествената интерпретация на войната през разбирането на авторите за умирането и смъртта и са посочени по три основни изобразителни стратегии във всяка типология. Типология 1 представя украинската виталност срещу руската морталност като противопоставяне между Добро и Зло; метаморфозите на тялото в контекста на войната; невъзможността да се изпълняват традиционните погребални ритуали в условията на война. В Типология 2 се вписват каталогизирането на руските военни престъпления; трансформацията на статуса на жертвите; отпорът – съзнателен и спонтанен – срещу агресията. В Типология 3 са пресъздадени пораждането на нови ритуали за преминаване в „другия свят“; пренасянето на изпитанията на душата от времето след физическата смърт във времето на очакване на смъртта; отварянето на светове между световете.*

Ключови думи: *военна драма, умиране, смърт, културни модели, изобразителни стратегии*

Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, death and the fear of it have become one of the major topics of Ukrainian war drama. Of course, there are two large dissimilar textual arrays at once noticeable here: the way death is perceived on the battlefield and its reception by non-combatant playwrights, who write mainly about the unnatural deaths of civilians in the war on Ukrainian territory, and a combatant's artistic reception of death, as manifested in the plays of Andriy Ivaniuk, Valeriy Puzyk, Dmytro Korchynsky, Alina Sarnytska, Yuriy Vetkin, Gennadiy Udovenko, Oleksandr Zhuhan, Maksym Devizorov, and other combatants during the eleven years of Ukrainian armed resistance to Russian aggression. The latter could be addressed in a separate literary discussion. However, the overwhelming majority of fictional texts created by Ukrainian playwrights

during 2022-2024 present the perception of war and its challenges, threats, and horrors that belong to civilians, both authors and their protagonists/witnesses.

Therefore, analytical studies of the conceptual field of Ukrainian drama in the three years in question, and an analysis of the semantic and aesthetic load of the basic concepts of human existence in the realities of war, such as *life*, *resistance*, *trauma*, *identity*, *occupation*, *collaboration*, *fear*, *death*, etc., seem relevant. In many contemporary Ukrainian plays about the war these concepts are intertwined and complementary, in a complex interaction, and model different artistic realities. However, the concept of death is one of the key concepts in plays about the life of Ukrainian civilians in war, and we can observe how its axiological and symbolic ranges, modelled by impromptu fiction, are rapidly expanding, because

the symbolic-interactional genesis of consciousness ... includes not only cognitive but also emotional vocabularies of motives for action (Halas 2021: 101).

In the long-term perspective of war, the experience of death and dying becomes commonplace, and it is very difficult for civilian authors to show its experience from the inside, as we will see in the case of combatant playwrights. Therefore, a similar non-combatant perspective of war becomes narrative material for numerous eyewitnesses of the deaths of others – the difference will not be in the points of view, but in the formats of what is experienced and seen, and the degree of personal trauma, which gradually turns into a global social trauma reflected by the fiction emerging as the war goes on.

Here, we may be primarily interested in the academic discourse that explores the experience of death which

has an important healing, transformative and evolutionary potential (Grof 2019: 268),

when death and dying are no longer perceived, even by observers, primarily as a tragedy, pain, something final and inevitable, and instead

the attitude to death and reconciliation with it has an important impact on the quality of human life, the hierarchy of values and the strategy of existence, ...can lead to a powerful spiritual disclosure (Grof 2019: 268).

Stanislav Grof compares the attitudes towards death in modern technologically developed countries with anthropological material on the most ancient mysterious rituals of transition (in favour of the latter) and concludes that

Modern research into holotropic states has brought new and unexpected discoveries in this problematic area. A systematic study of experiences during psychedelic sessions (using powerful non-pharmacological forms of psychotherapy) and during spontaneous psychospiritual crises has shown that under these circumstances people can experience a range of unusual states, including death throes and dying, descent into hell, appearing before the judgement of God, rebirth, reaching the heavenly realms and memories from previous incarnations. These states are strikingly similar to the descriptions we find in the eschatological texts of ancient and pre-industrial cultures (Grof 2019: 277).

The situation of a great war of conquest on the European continent in the twenty-first century is perceived as a collapse of the humanistic model that European intellectuals have been building for centuries (Filipchuk 2023: 366), but the formats of its representation in contemporary Ukrainian drama are various and use different aesthetic tools. Therefore, it is logical that, depending on the basic approach, the conceptual field in which culture describes this war and, accordingly, the models and plots of its cultural comprehension will be significantly transformed and problematised.

This allows for different perspectives of the same concept, from the essence of war itself to the consideration of the concept of death as one of its key parameters, so let us consider three conceptually different cultural models of non-combatant war drama and highlight their dissimilar textual strategies.

MODEL 1.

War is interpreted as a clash between 'two worlds, two opposing philosophies, two radically different civilisational vectors' (Humeniuk 2023: 203) – the symbolic model of the cognition of *death* as as a result of the battle between *Good* and *Evil* (Duran 2021: 167).

Strategy 1: An Endless Battle

The representations of dying/death narratives in war drama are in many ways similar to those of black-and-white photography, which captures the exact moment of the expectation of death or its occurrence, when images work in two ways – as a shock and as a cliché (Sontag 2024: 49). This expectation/occurrence is experienced by a particular human character while two opposing archetypal forces – Good and Evil – fight for their supremacy over his or her world.

The protagonist of Neda Nezhdana's play *Kitty:* I*n Memory of Darkness* tells her own story of dying in a Donbas separatist prison – her fate is now in the hands of her former childhood abuser, a pro-Russian terrorist, whom she begs for one thing – her own death:

She: At night, I had a break – I lay on the cold concrete, hungry and cold, and thought about God and about death... About death – to stop suffering. But how? Tell me – in this empty concrete cell – how? And I felt God's hopelessness...

Kill me, please. You're not going to let me live anyway. And I don't want to... Just kill me. Can you?

And I was lying there preparing to die... (Nezhdana 2023 (2): 292, 294).

Suspended dying gives the protagonist the prospect of living a new – different – life, in a new place, in the status of a refugee: her Kitty dies the death she was destined to, i.e., a compensatory sacrifice is still taking place. Interestingly, the woman recalls the history of her family: her great-great-great-grandfather was a Cossack, who received land for his service, founded a settlement, built a local church and hospital; her great-grandmother was of a noble family, but it was dangerous to admit to her 'non-proletarian' family roots in Soviet times. Her great-grandfather was killed by a German bomb in the basement of his house during World War II when he was hiding a Jewish girl from being killed. In this context, Ukrainians on their own land, in their own homes, have a constant struggle with their oppressors – they are simply defending their right to live in their own homes, which is constantly being taken away from them either by aggressors or the empire.

A similar transgenerational situation of a global struggle between Good and Evil, between life and death, between Ukrainians and the empire, is found in Alex Borovensky's text *Bayonet*: at the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, his protagonist recounts the history of his family from his grandfather's side and testifies that it was a relay race against the aggressors for the right to exist on their own land, in their ancestral home, simply for the right to live and be themselves.

He: *I am a son. And a grandson. And a great-grandson. I am telling you all this because it happened to me. Because I am me. Father. My grandfather. And great-grandfather. They are all here. In me. And under me. And I'm standing on them. On my land. On ours*.' (Borovenskyi 2023: 493).

Obviously, this strategy implies the eternity of the battle in which Ukrainian vitality is opposed to Russian imperial mortality. It is no coincidence that Oleh Pokalchuk contrasts Ukraine with Russia in the context of the main worldview and behavioural patterns: in his interpretation, Ukraine is committed to life, development, love and is seen as the 'civilisation of Eros', while Russia is seen as the 'civilisation of Thanatos', which 'cultivates death as a phenomenon and feeds on it' (Semkiv 2022: 97). Therefore, the Russians have nothing to offer Ukrainians but the death of people and the destruction of statehood and identity. This strategy is fully motivated by the Ukrainian eternal resistance, which takes many lives.

Strategy 2**: **Metamorphosis of the Body

The body, according to Alla Kyrydon, is at the centre of one of the leading epistemological approaches to contemporary interdisciplinary humanities, 'recognised as the most important dimension of human existence' and becomes the main subject of 'experience-based human knowledge' (Kyrydon 2016: 200). Ukrainian drama dealing with full-scale war represents various transformations that occur to human bodies in the process of dying/death. Such transformations rarely become metaphysical, as, for example, in Neda Nezhdana's play *Kitty in Memory of Darkness*, where the protagonist after physical torture does not feel the organs and functions of her own body at all, 'because the body has long since turned into one continuous pain' (Nezhdana 2023 (2): 291). Most often, we are talking about external transformations that are visible to everyone: ~~of~~ the characters, narrator, playwright, reader/viewer, and interpreter.

When Inna Goncharova records in her play *Trumpeter*, the deaths of Mariupol residents in the basements of the Azovstal Iron and Steel Works the extras are genderless bodies, with only a few central characters having a gender.

The protagonist of Olga Annenko's play *Love Me not Leave Me*, who fled the war to France, has to urgently travel to Ukraine to identify the body of her son, an animal volunteer caretaker whose car was crushed by a Russian tank near Dymerka, not far from Kyiv – '*not the body, but what was left of it*' (Annenko 2023: 266). The remains of the body do not even allow for the identification of the deceased, so the participants of the search operation take into account the car number plates, the colour of the clothes, and the volunteer's ID. Similarly, in Tetiana Kitsenko's drama *The Cross*, the villagers cannot understand who the bodies of tortured people dug up near the shop belonging to – 'Alevtyna: *And they look like corpses – it's distorted. We saw for ourselves: the clothes are burnt, and the dogs have gnawed on them, but the head is still there*' (Kytsenko 2022). In Oleksandr Viter's *The Taste of*

the Sun, somewhere near the place where frightened animals come running after the explosions, there are bodies of their owners, who the dogs recognise only by their clothes – 'Puf: *People. Dead. Two of them. She is in a white jacket. And he is in a blue coat'* (Viter 2023 (2): 304). Such bodies have an individuality only for a very narrow circle of the living; for the rest of us, they become just mass nameless victims. Sometimes the victims are lucky enough to have their bodies accidentally identified and named, as in Natalka Vorozhbyt's play *Green Corridors*, where a manicurist from Bucha watches a TV report in Europe about people killed during the occupation and recognises her client by the manicure she had done on the eve of the full-scale war. The image of this woman's hand with a manicure then spread across the world's media, but for Ukrainian theatre artists, the real moral challenge is whether it is worthwhile or permissible to use such documented bodily images of tortured Ukrainians in performances, whether it violates the ethical principles of the victims and their families, when the artistic intention of the authors of a dramatic work (similar to the photographs of atrocities, which Susan Sontag writes about in her book '*Watching the Pain of Others*') risks questioning the very importance of testimony.

Without resorting to lengthy descriptions, in his play *Memel-Dnipro*, Artur Sumarokov shows the mangled body of a Kherson resident in the trunk of a Chechen occupier's car – a body with traces of physical torture, whose brain is still working and counting down to the last minute of life:

Max is lying in the trunk next to Masha's bloody corpse. Blood is flowing from his mouth in a thin stream. His hands are tied behind him with ropes, and the fingers of both hands are missing nails. He can hear his heartbeat and the intermittent sounds of breathing.

60 59 58 57 56 55 54 53 52 51 50 49 48 47 46 45 44 43 42 41 40 39 38 37 36 35 34 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21... (Sumarokov 2023: 276).

In the dramatic monologue *Russian Roulette Marathon* by Kateryna Penkova, there is a microscene almost in the style of Guernica: the survivors of the previous missile attack run to the bunker, literally stepping over the bodies of those who cannot be helped in the short interval between missile attacks:

Protagonist: We left people there because we knew they would die. There is nothing to help. There is nothing. There is almost no head. No arms, no legs. Nothing at all. Just a stump lying there... and breathing. And it speaks and asks:

– Don't leave me.

It crawls after you and asks:
– Don't leave me (Penkova 2023: 24).

In addition, the author of this play, Kateryna Penkova, dares to show the dying, the moments of death and the mutilated bodies of several children in Mariupol. Susan Sontag has argued that in photography, 'the deaths of children can be used over and over again' (Sontag 2024: 39), creating and intensifying hatred of the enemy, which works for any receptive audience. However, contemporary Ukrainian playwrights very rarely and cautiously resort to this emotional resource as if establishing unspoken boundaries of what is permissible and unacceptable. Kateryna Penkova, among other torn children's bodies, visualises the body of a previously wounded and treated teenager in a wheelchair, a body cut by mine fragments during another shelling of Mariupol, and uses the technique of instantaneous 'disembodiment', 'melting' of the body – 'Black smoke and white fluff... from the down jacket – all that remains of the person' (Penkova 2023: 24).

The playwrights also use the complete absence of bodies as a conceptual device, so that they only communicate the death of people in one form or another. Kateryna Penkova uses this method to tell a young mother of many children about the death of her newborn child in a maternity hospital in Mariupol, which was destroyed by a Russian air raid. Alevtina, the protagonist of *The Cross* by Tatiana Kitsenko, goes to her full-time job in the district centre in the first days of the full-scale invasion, and in her absence, the Russians occupy her village and take her husband and adult son, whose bodies have not yet been found. So she goes to identify the bodies left after the occupiers left the village and is constantly in a situation of uncertainty about the fate and format of her family members' deaths, and she recognises the fact of their deaths as inevitable, because she would have known something about the living at least by now. In his drama *Call Signs from the Other Life*, Oleh Mykolaychuk-Nyzovets introduces the Voice in the post-finale, which tells of the three main characters:

Halyna Kashtan (call sign Lily of the Valley) went missing during the defence of Mariupol.
Marko Marian (call sign Kashtan) was seriously wounded in the battle for Makariv.
Vitalii Krasniuk (call sign Sokil) was killed in a fierce battle with a column of enemy tanks in Chernihiv region (Mykolaichuk-Nyzovets 2023: 94).

We can see that the fact of death is recorded by the playwright only for the last of the characters, but other bodily events are marked, such as severe injuries and the complete disappearance of the body.

At the same time, the playwrights see the bodily 'reincarnations' of collaborators and occupiers either in an allegorical and satirical way or with a relish for the act of physical revenge itself, regardless of whether it is an act of providence or a specific person who is taking such revenge.

In the drama *The Day of the Bombed Theatre*, Ihor and Liuba Lypovski mock the director of the Mariupol theatre, who turned out to be a collaborator and happily greeted the occupiers: his ego 'flew in different directions' when he 'happily went out to the square to meet the "asvabaditeli" and a bomb fell from the sky' 'legs with a supertask in one direction', 'hands with a grain of resentment in the other', and 'a worthless head with a hole through it straight into the "Russian world" ' (Lypovski 2022).

In the play *The Carrier* by Nina Zakhozhenko, there is a scene where the Russian occupiers in a village between Kherson and Mykolaiv try local vodka infused with apricot pits, and one of the occupiers turns into a goat, 'acting strangely, running and screaming like a goat'. At this time, the old woman, who has quietly added poison to the vodka, calmly thinks aloud:

Baba: When a man turns into a goat, it's hard to do anything about it. Let him out, let him run around the field for a day or two, eat grass, roll on the ground, maybe something human will wake up in him... (Zakhozhenko 2023: 159).

The protagonist of Andriy Bondarenko's play *Snuff* recalls how, as a teenager, he read all of Dostoevsky and wanted to be like Rodion Raskolnikov, and sewed an axe loop – 'like Raskolnikov's' – inside the sleeve of his coat, which became a marker of incredible coolness among his peers. But in the end, having rethought himself and his attitude to Russian culture due to the war, he watches a snapshot of a Ukrainian drone practicing on a Russian soldier's trench, and mentally makes Dostoevsky's character an instrument of his own revenge on the imperial aggressors:

Protagonist: I'm sleeping and watching a video of a drone dropping Rodion Raskolnikov's axe on Russian soldiers in a trench. The axe begins to chop up Russian soldiers. It cuts out a large five-pointed star from their bodies. The star begins to dance. A bomb falls from above (Bondarenko, 2022 (2)).

In this strategy, war and death appear as destructive operators which prey on people, mainly on their physical bodies, and deprive them of life,

certain features, and functionality. Moreover, Ukrainian drama reveals a different attitude to such processes in relation to civilian Ukrainians who became victims of aggression and to the occupiers and their henchmen, who are actually responsible for the suffering and death of civilian Ukrainians – demonstrative cruelty and any form of revenge are justified against them.

Strategy 3: Destruction of the Burial Rite

If we consider the burial rite, not in its essence as a transformation of the social and ontological state of the human body, but by the processes that accompany its departure to the 'other' world, we can distinguish three successive stages: '1) preparatory (includes everything that happens 'before the cemetery'), 2) funeral (everything that takes place at the cemetery), 3) memorial (everything that takes place 'after the cemetery')' (Konnov 2015: 43-44). Let's look at how civilian deaths occur in plays about the full-scale war.

In front of their children, a Russian missile kills both parents in Artem Lebedev's play *Vertep*, a very painful memory for student Elena and her autistic younger brother Mikhas:

Olena: We lived in our beautiful house. Together with my parents. And then... we were about to leave for Lviv, we were in the car, and my mother and father forgot something in the house and went there. At that moment, a bomb hit the house. And there was almost nothing left of them... (Lebediev 2023: 189).

In February 2022, in occupied Bucha, a character in Maryna Smilyanets's play *Borsch. My Great-Grandmother's Recipe for Survival* sees a car with shot bodies – "A man, a woman and two boys" (Smilianets 2023: 323): the locals are not allowed to bury these bodies "humanely" – they remain in the broken car. And in another part of the same play, an old woman tells her dog that in their occupied village in the Chernihiv region, those villagers who went to get humanitarian aid never came back, that is, they disappeared forever.

Collecting documentary eyewitness accounts of the occupation of the Kyiv region, Neda Nezhdana's play *Closed Sky* globalises the model of a dead earth, a kind of post-Gothic cemetery that swallows up well-kept and cosy towns near Kyiv, now plunged into the entropy and chaos of death:

The Second (woman): Tortured, raped, killed with their hands tied. Children in front of their parents. Parents in front of their children... One five-year-old boy turned completely grey... And the animals! Horses burned alive in stables... A herd of cows shot by hailstones... Girls raped, small, with

teeth knocked out, with the letter Z carved on their chests... Run over by tanks, burned... Hanging naked on trees... (Nezhdana 2023 (1): 450).

In many plays devoted to the tragedy of Mariupol, either in full or in episodes (*Mariupol Drama* by Oleksandr Havrosh, *Closed Sky* by Neda Nezhdana, *Fragments and Puzzles* by Olha Matsiupa, *Trumpeter* by Inna Honcharova, *Ten Kilometres* by Iryna Feofanova, *City of Mary: Diaries of the Siege*' by Andriy Bondarenko, *Faces of the Colour War* by Oleksiy Hnatiuk, *Russian Roulette Marathon* by Kateryna Penkova, *Everything Remained in Mariupol* by Tetyana Kitsenko, *Mariupol #Hope_for_Dawn* by Maryna Pinchuk, *Planting Apple Trees* by Iryna Harets, *Under the Open Sky* by Kateryna Prykhodkina, *Remembering the Future* by Oleksandr Viter, *The Sea Will Remain* by Oleh Mykhailov, etc.), an entire Ukrainian city becomes a spontaneous mass grave.

Kateryna Penkova, for example, shows how, under constant shelling, people cannot take away the corpse of a disabled teenager – he remains in his wheelchair in the cold open air. And Andriy Bondarenko labels the period of the Russian siege of Mariupol as an early Apocalypse:

These are the days
of burying corpses under the
the entrance
of a multi-storey
building.
The apocalypse continues (Bondarenko 2022 (1))

In Oleg Mikhailov's play *The Sea Will Remain*, there is a chilling story told through a sign language interpreter by a mute fifteen-year-old girl about how the occupiers shot cars with people trying to evacuate the city, how they mined all the exits from the city, how Ukrainian families were blown up by mines, how the severely wounded died in front of her eyes, how random people buried corpses and put car number plates on top of the graves so that the graves could be found and recognised one day, and the buried bodies could be identified.

There are many more examples and quotes, but the picture is almost always the same: Ukrainians are dying from shelling, targeted shootings, atrocities, rapes, and landmines – but are not able to be buried, and sometimes not even identified. As we can see, with such a scale of deaths of Ukrainian civilians recorded by Ukrainian playwrights, the integrity of the burial rite, and even the burial itself or compliance with at least some of its

stages, is out of the question, and the rite has been virtually cancelled for an indefinite period of time.

Even after the de-occupation, people in cities, towns, and villages try to organise the burial of the dead, as in the play *The Cross* by Tetyana Kitsenko, a former village council worker Fedorovych helps to dig up and bury the corpses of his fellow villagers tortured by the Russian Buryats in order to restore the very justice of the burial tradition. In the occupied territories, countless mass graves are growing, where bodies are simply dumped – in dozens and hundreds, without identification, as if to forever erase the memory of a large number of Ukrainians, as if to cancel their lives on the occupied land.

MODEL 2.

War, following Susan Sontag, and contrary to modern beliefs and ethics, is seen as the norm, and peace as the exception, especially in the context of Ukrainian history (Sontag 2024: 92) – in this case, the perception of death fits into the formula 'the description of the brutality of war is conceived as an attack on the sensitive viewer' (Sontag 2024: 67). Non-combatant drama from the period of the full-scale invasion is looking for a special metalanguage that would allow capturing the war in its changing moments, in the dynamics of its reception by Ukrainians, given how difficult it is to speak about one's own deep trauma and to condition memories of one's own traumatic experiences:

These memories, these stories, stand apart from the rest of our life experiences because they may involve actions that are directly opposite to what we consider acceptable human behavior. The violence and destruction that accompany war, the killing and wounding, the cruelty and hatred, are often beyond our ability to comprehend. We see it, but sometimes we cannot fully comprehend it, because it is beyond our comprehension (Kepps 2021: 134).

It is no coincidence that the strategies in this model are balanced in the 'aggressor *versus* victim of aggression' dimension, where war is synonymous with destruction, death, sacrifice and heroism at the same time.

Strategy 1: A Catalogue of the Aggressor's Crimes

Compiling such a catalogue cannot be a preference for one or more playwrights, because each playwright captures the events of the war locally, based on his or her own experience and on documenting the testimonies of certain categories of people. However, from the sum of the playwrights' texts, the cataloguing of Russian crimes against Ukrainian civilians appears

as a full and open semantic structure, the levels of which record mass murder, targeted and accidental destruction of people, and most importantly, expose the genocidal intentions of imperial Russia and its claims to intimidate or completely destroy the Ukrainians.

Neda Nezhdana in her play *Closed Skies* catalogues the crimes committed by Russians against Ukrainians, naming the main ones: the destruction of children as the destruction of the future – this refers to the aerial bombs dropped on a maternity hospital full of women in labour and babies (the most famous stories are of the Mariupol maternity hospital and the private reproductive clinic Adonis near the Zhytomyr highway in the Kyiv region); convincing Ukrainians that they have nowhere to hide – the demonstrative destruction of a theatre with many civilians in it, and the words 'Children' written in Russian in large letters in front of both facades (the most tragic case was the destruction of the Mariupol theatre, but later the Severodonetsk theatre suffered the same fate); intimidation of those who wanted to leave the occupied territories – shooting of evacuation convoys of civilian Ukrainians or torture in filtration camps (which took place in all areas where Russian troops entered, but was most widespread in the Kyiv and Kherson regions); finally, mass rapes of women and girls by Russian occupiers in the occupied territories – 'The Second: So that our women no longer want anything. . so that they do not give birth...' (Nezhdana 2023 (1): 451).

The author does not mention topographical realities, so the picture of the war in her interpretation is perceived not as the sum of local documented crimes of Russians against Ukrainians, but as a large-scale canvas of a consistent genocide designed to erase Ukrainian identity forever in several generations, from infants to the elderly. The destruction of the Mariupol maternity hospital is depicted in the plays *Planting Apple Trees* by Iryna Harets and *Mariupol Drama* by Oleksandr Havrosh, and the crime against the townspeople who were hiding in the Mariupol theatre is depicted in the plays *Mariupol Drama* by Oleksandr Havrosh, *The Day of the Bombed Theatre* by Ihor and Lyuba Lipovskyi, *Fragments and Puzzles* by Olha Matsiupa, the struggle for survival in the basements of Azovstal is embodied in the play *The Trumpeter* by Inna Honcharova, a generalised chronicle of the tragic events of the besieged Mariupol is offered in the plays *The Survivor Syndrome* and *The City of Mary: Diaries of the Siege* by Andriy Bondarenko, *Ten Kilometres* by Iryna Feofanova, *Faces of the Colour War* by Oleksiy Hnatiuk, *Russian Roulette Marathon* by Kateryna Penkova, and *In the Open Air* by Anastasia Prykhodkina.

Inna Goncharova's play *The Trumpeter* records the constant months-long shelling by Russian artillery of the basements of Azovstal, where many civilians, mostly women and children, are hiding alongside the military.

Andriy Bondarenko tries to capture both the crimes of the Russians against the civilians of Mariupol and the desire of the city's residents to reduce their own suffering in the process of dying:

A car with refugees
is being shot
under this sun
people are dying
in the shadow of this sun,
covered with concrete walls (Bondarenko 2022 (1))

In Mariupol,
people pray that
they will not die a death
as terrible as the way their neighbours
have already died.
They want to die instantly.
The fact that they will all fall into that black,
dark pit one way or another,
over which they are now trying to hold on,
they no longer doubt (Bondarenko 2022 (1))

In his parable *The Sea Will Remain*, Oleg Mikhailov, when a deaf and mute girl who looks like their deceased daughter, who managed to escape the besieged city with her baby, enters the couple's house in a village near Mariupol, but the rest of the people travelling with her died:

He: She was carrying the dead and did not know (Mykhailov 2023: 483).

It is noteworthy that the catalogue of Russian crimes compiled by Ukrainian playwrights over the past three years seems to be growing in time and space. For example, the authors of the plays in the online playwrights' anthology *Without Them* look back and look at the long history of Russian persecution of Ukrainians in a deep trans-generational retrospective, from the destruction of the Zaporizhzhian Sich, the massacres of Baturyn, Sandormokh, Solovki, the dispossession of Ukrainian peasants, the Holodomor genocide, repression, deportations, to the crimes of this new stage of full-scale war: 'execution lists' prepared by the Russians for the physical massacre of proactive Ukrainians (*Text about the Russians* by Olena Hapieieva); mass rapes of Ukrainian women by Russian invaders (*Modus imperativus* by Olha Matsiupa); a Russian missile hitting a residential high-rise building (*Not About Raccoon* by Iryna Harets); the bombed homes of ordinary

Ukrainians (*Modus imperativus* by Olha Matsiupa, *Not About Raccoon* by Iryna Harets) or their lives taken away (*How Not to Become a Katsap*[1] by Oksana Hrytsenko, *Methodology* by Yulia Honchar, *Not About Raccoon* by Iryna Harets, *The Cross* by Tetiana Kitsenko); the occupation of Kherson (*Not About Raccoon* by Iryna Harets, *Text about Russians* by Olena Hapieieva) or Kyiv region (*The Cross* by Tetiana Kitsenko); looting by Russians in the occupied Ukrainian territories (*Not About Raccoon* by Iryna Harets, *Big* by Oksana Hrytsenko, *Text about Russians* by Olena Hapieieva); horrors, murders, torture that the Russian army always brings with it (*Text about Russians* by Olena Hapieieva); 'missiles flying at Kyiv, people killed in Bucha, Mariupol wiped off the map, the dried-up body of a cat on a child's bed in an abandoned apartment' (*Focus on the Future* by Lyudmyla Tymoshenko) (Tymoshenko 2022); all-out missile attacks on Ukraine's energy structure for several months, which made "an electric kettle and a washing machine inaccessible benefits of civilisation" (*Focus on the Future* by Lyudmyla Tymoshenko) (Tymoshenko 2022); the illegal incorporation of the occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions into Russia, and the enshrining of this in the Russian constitution, against which, after one of the massive missile attacks on Kyiv, the deaths of three civilians of different ages and social status were recorded as a result of the arrival of only one of the ballistic missiles – a 17-year-old girl who was just crossing the road, a minibus driver and a railway crossing guard (*Methodology* by Yulia Honchar).

Between these retrospective and contemporary invectives are other deaths of Ukrainians and crimes committed by Russians against them: the death in 2012, when Putin once again became Russian president, of Ukrainian playwright Anna Yablonska, who collaborated with Russian 'new drama', in Domodedovo, Russia, at the hands of an Ingushetian suicide bomber who was taking revenge on the Russians for his family killed in the Chechen war (*Text about Russians* by Olena Gapeeva); the murders of civilian Ukrainians by Russian snipers at the Kyiv Maidan uprising (*Snuff* by Andriy Bondarenko, *Hocus Pocus* by Liudmyla Tymoshenko), which includes the story of an Armenian youth, Serhiy Nigoyan, whose family 'once moved to Ukraine to escape the war in Nagorno-Karabakh' (*Hocus Pocus* by Liudmyla Tymoshenko) (Tymoshenko 2022); the annexation of Crimea (*How not to become a Katsap* by Oksana Hrytsenko, *Focus on the Future* by Lyudmyla Tymoshenko); the pogrom of the State Administration by pro-Russian thugs in Kharkiv in spring 2014, when 'the Ukrainian poet Serhiy Zhadan was led

[1] A derogatory name for Russians.

through a corridor of shame and brutally beaten in front of the building of the Regional State Administration' (*Snuff* by Andriy Bondarenko) (Bondarenko 2022 (2)); the loss of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the downing of a passenger Boeing 777 by Russians near the occupied city of Torez (Liudmyla Tymoshenko's *Hocus Pocus*); reprisals against people with a pro-Ukrainian position in occupied Donetsk, torture in Russian prisons (*Snuff* by Andriy Bondarenko); a full-scale attack on Ukraine, which by early 2022 was already fully prepared and planned (*How Not to Become a Katsap* by Oksana Hrytsenko). In her text *Hocus Pocus*, Liudmyla Tymoshenko uses the metaphor of a cage with a snow-white pigeon, which is used by a magician for a trick, crushing the bird with a cage's double bottom, after that another bird is put into the cage, which will suffer the same fate. According to the playwright, unpunished evil turns into a new, even greater evil, and the global community should have realised this long ago.

This strategy allows for endlessly increasing the number of facts and their interpretations and creates the preconditions for a dialogue between playwrights and texts within the system.

Strategy 2: Defining the Status of the Victim

Eva Domanska emphasises the cognitively privileged status of the victim in the theory of modern humanities, which clearly states that in order to be considered a real victim, 'one must be active and participate in the struggle' (Domanska 2012: 143). Hanna Uliura sees the main contemporary emphasis of the victim's status in the idea that 'the victim is a sacred thing; it is what the community is ready to sacrifice in order to harmonise relations that are currently out of order' (Uliura 2023: 198). At the same time, in sacred aesthetics, sacrifice corresponds to the status of asceticism: from reduced corporeality or even 'disembodied figurative images' (Slovnyk 2006: 26) to other specific manifestations of renunciation, reclusiveness, and self-sacrifice. In this context, the cemetery city of Mariupol with its thousands of unburied bodies and the dried-up body of a cat in a locked and abandoned apartment in Mariupol are perceived in the same liturgical way and fit into the parameters of the sacrificial price of Ukrainian resistance to Russian aggression.

The comprehension of Ukrainians as *victims* of the war in the drama of 2022-2024 is not through the representation of their heroic deeds or emphatically resistant behaviour, but is conceptualised mainly in terms of the statistics of unjustified brutal civilian deaths. The situation in Mariupol is again the most illustrative. For example, Andriy Bondarenko measures the distance between Lviv and Mariupol not in 1250 kilometres, but in '1250 corpses of civilians, and this is only according to the official statistics for

today, which always downplays everything in order not to tease the Apocalypse, not to look it in the eye' – *Survivor Syndrome* (Bondarenko 2022 (1)); Olena Astasieva compares the number of civilians killed in Mariupol: 22,000 according to city mayor alone: with the population of the Irish city of Wexford, where she is hiding from the war, because that is the number of people living there: *Dictionary of Wartime Emotions*; Lyudmyla Tymoshenko considers Mariupol and its sacrificial tragedy as one of the 'points of no return' – that is, something that the Russians can never be forgiven for – in *Focus-Pocus*. These were texts created as soon as the first statistics on civilian casualties in Mariupol were available. Six months later, even the statistical picture has changed significantly. Kateryna Penkova, in the finale of the play *Russian Roulette Marathon*, provides and comments on the official statistics of civilian deaths in Mariupol as of September 2022:

The Protagonist: According to official figures, 87,000 people died in Mariupol. But how many more are unknown, missing, buried under the rubble in the entrances... By 24 February, 430,000' people lived in the city. That is, approximately one in five people died (Penkova 2023: 37).

This strategy should correlate with the previous one, but differs from it in that, firstly, unlike the universal understanding of crimes, especially those committed against humanity and mankind and having no statute of limitations, the understanding of the status of the victim will be individual for each particular playwright, and secondly, in that victims can be not only those who are affected by the consequences of the crimes.

For example, the slow death of several animals in an abandoned apartment in Mariupol in Kristina Bagaeva's play *We Were (Not) Abandoned* is not due to the criminal intent of their owners, who deliberately left their pets to fend for themselves, but to a tragic set of circumstances when people left the animals enough food and water and went out of town for a couple of days and then failed to return.

Strategy 3: Acceptance of Death as Rectitude

This strategy is used to glorify those who refuse to be labelled as *victims* and make a personal decision about an act/actions that give them the right to dignity but take their lives. The category of rectitude is a modern transformation of the option of *uprightness* formulated by Sergei Averyntsev, which is seen as an attempt by a person who has crouched down under the burden of circumstances to 'straighten up and move to natural uprightness', as a rather belated 'restoration of the natural norm' (Averyntsev 2007: 603),

which gives everyone, regardless of the degree of their natural heroism, the opportunity to die with dignity.

In this strategy, we are confronted with either conscious, deliberate decisions of the characters or their momentary, emotional impulses.

Conscious decisions can be demonstrated by the characters of yesterday's civilians, who consciously and voluntarily stand up for Ukraine as soldiers at the moment of existential threat to the country (*Call Signs from the Other Life* by Oleh Mykolaychuk-Nyzovets, *Three Attempts to Improve Life* by Maksym Kurochkin, *No Point in Being Afraid* by Andriy Ivanyuk, *Prayer for Elvis* by Maryna Smilyanets, *She + War* by Svitlana Spasyba and Kateryna Chepura, *The Prince and the Woman* by Anna Bahriana, *The Honored Chosen* by Volodymyr Serdyuk, *Trumpeter* by Inna Honcharova, *Beware of Mine* by Yulia Gudoshnyk, *War Notebook* by Valeriy Puzyk, etc.) Inna Goncharova's play *Trumpeter* is unique, as the Azov soldiers leave the basements of Azovstal on the orders of the state leaders, and many of them realize that Russian captivity will mean death for them, even though they hear the phantom *Survive!* "Trumpeter: This is the main task for each of us..." (Honcharova 2023: 432). However, as soldiers of their country, they cannot but follow the orders of its leadership.

In such plays, the first link of the classical heroic scheme of the national epic is triggered: war becomes an initiation, a separation of the new Hero from everyday life, pulling him "out of the disgusting stagnation of peacetime," from existence "in the humiliating tranquility" associated with the achievement of "the lowest ideal of security and possession" (Kaiua 2003: 222) and translating his consciousness into a state of mind close to the religious. At the same time, not every one of these heroes is guaranteed to return home alive: sometimes the consequence of a heroic act, in which the hero is supposedly freed from sins and forgiven, is premature death: because "just as a mother risks her life in giving birth to a child, so nations must pay a bloody tribute to establish or prolong their existence" (Kaiua 2003: 222).

However, those who join the warrior community also have a chance to complete the initiation and return home as "reborn" heroes: here, both the acceptance of war as Fate (it may be favourable to the Hero) and the sudden opportunity to "overcome the psychological defenses that usually keep dangerous perinatal urges under control" (Grof 2019: 370) are at work: global scenarios of replaying death can endow the Hero with the ability to overcome death.

Along with meaningful decisions, the plays also show impulsive ones of those characters who tried to escape the war and maximize their lives and/or the survival of their families. For a young mother of two who escapes from Bucha in Iryna Feofanova's play *Alien*, and ends up at her aunt's house

in a village between Chernihiv and Kyiv, the decision to organize the villagers' resistance and stop Russian tanks from advancing on Kyiv is spontaneous and instantaneous, and she gets a chance to live after being wounded. Instead, the teenager Mike in the play *Me, War and a Plastic Grenade* by Nina Zakhozhenko decides to "treat these bastards to a cocktail"[2]), and under the requests in social media of his friends and peers not to do so, he puts up a "flaming smiley" (Zakhozhenko 2022: 48). Baba in the play *The Milkweed* by Oksana Hrytsenko dies peacefully by herself after she helped Ukrainian special forces to destroy a significant number of Russian occupiers in her native village in the Kherson region, and most importantly, "Olesia: She caused panic among the enemy, intimidating and disorienting the Russians with the milkweed[3] not only in our village, but throughout the entire district. Now this is the name of our reconnaissance group" (Hrytsenko 2023: 167).

This strategy secures the character's status as a Hero and prevents him from moving to the level of an *ordinary victim* and, in case of incomplete initiation, marks him as a *sacred victim*.

DEL 3.

War is seen as a specific mystical space not in the parameters of heroic myth/epic, but as "a category available to poetics" (Chervinska 2011: 14), which, like any other mystical unit, is at the same time a problem with "a rather conditional, not to say random, contour of the research field" (Chervinska 2011: 25), and here ritual practices of different times associated with systems of "rituals of transition", when a person "places their ideal of humanity in the superhuman sphere" (Eliade 2001: 97-99) or letting the otherworld into oneself, using it as a tool for deep self-knowledge, as "a discovery of the identity of the individual and the divine" that helps to achieve "one's identity with the cosmic source" (Grof 2019: 332).

Strategy 1: Modeling New Rituals of Transition

This strategy allows us to work with characters whose "situational identity" (Halas 2021: 109) prevents them from acquiring a true identity, or with those for whom reality is changing catastrophically, causing "a change in the ontological mode of being and social status" (Eliade 2001: 97).

[2] "Molotov cocktail": a homemade explosive mixture that has become a symbol and tool of popular resistance since the Revolution of Dignity

[3] Baba told everyone that milkweed has a totemic mystical power of her land that destroys the occupiers.

A classic example of the implementation of this strategy in war drama is the play *Bread Truce*, written by Serhiy Zhadan a few years before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. His Donbas characters are stuck between worlds and countries, between the Soviet era, which has not let them go mentally, and the realities of the new hybrid war of the twenty-first century. They find themselves in a *grey zone* in the vain hope that the war will pass them by. Both life and death are seen by these people as an existential trap, and the open ending of the work leaves them a chance to be purified by fire and realise themselves anew or to die tragically.

Almost the same chance, either to die in the basement of Azovstal without food, water, communication, medicine, weapons, or to go to the surface and surrender, is given to the characters in Inna Goncharova's play *The Trumpeter*. Their journey will take them through torture and ill-treatment, through the Olenivka prison camp, and with little chance of a prisoner of war exchange.

In non-combatant Ukrainian drama about the war, the lower boundary of the rite of passage is significantly moved: occupation, encirclement, and attempts to break through to their own are already perceived by the characters as death or as falling into an infernal otherworldly hopelessness.

At the beginning of the play *Russian Roulette Marathon* Kateryna Penkova paints a verbal picture of the hellish world that has taken over Mariupol since the first arrivals of Russian missiles on the morning of February 24, 2022:

The Protagonist: Something infernal is happening outside. As if hell itself had exploded and vomited out all the burning sulfur: everything whistles, thunders, hums, shines, explodes. A salute to which we will die (Penkova 2023: 20).

In an effort to protect the psychological health of her two children, the protagonist wants to tell them a fairy tale story about the transition to a better world, represented as a game of crawling into and through a mare's head[4], but in her state of affect she confuses *mare* with *cow*, and the children remind her that a similar story with a cow's head is from Japanese horror stories. Then the woman's imagination, triggered by the endless explosions everywhere, quickly paints the rite of passage in completely different colours and tones, drawing a scary and physiologically accurate sketch:

[4] The motif of a popular Ukrainian fairytale

The Protagonist: Fear, horror... I forget what it is. These words have lost their sound, as if they had remained in dead Latin.

Now there is only Mariupol.

We will crawl into the ear of a severed cow's head, into the torn open belly of a dog, pretend to be meat and bones, maggots and worms, rot and mold with the smell of dead bodies.

And we will pray hard so that death does not smell the smell of a still living person (Penkova 2023: 21).

Yulia Honchar in her text *Methodology* reflects that even being under occupation is practically equal to death, which many may not even know about: "There was no special news from occupied Kherson, people were just being killed there quietly and peacefully" (Honchar 2022).

In several plays, the image of the boatman Charon appears in different ways, in different plays. Nina Zakhozhenko in her drama *The Carrier* very distantly associates her character of the driver, who can leave the village by agreement with the occupiers and transports goods to the villagers, and Ihor and Liuba Lipovski in the play *The Day of the Bombed Theater* allow their shell-shocked character Zavlit to mistake a local tragic actor for Charon. In Volodymyr Serdyuk's cycle *The Chosen Ones*, the full-fledged character Charon takes the soul of a young Ukrainian soldier to the land of the dead, whose body is being resuscitated by military doctors, and tells him that the ancient Greeks knew more than modern people because they composed beautiful stories about how at the last moment "Charon: Pain leaves the body, allowing the soul to ascend easily. Because the soul soars" (Serdiuk 2023: 370). And in Oleksandr Viter's play *Remember the Future*, Charon transports an entire destroyed city across the waters of a dead river, personified by a creature named Urb:

URB: Hey! Mr. Charon! You have a new customer here! Do you hear me? No... Don't look so surprised. I understand that you're used to other passengers... But I didn't choose... If I could choose, I would gladly postpone the trip in your glorious boat to the distant or even very distant future... But it just so happened... What? Are you surprised by my face? Is it my fault? You yourself understand that our acquaintance is not my initiative... Besides... Don't look so surprised... I know! I know! You've had to carry people like me before... Not often, but I've had to... What? You're not surprised by my personality, but by the fact that you've had a lot of passengers like me lately? And all from the same country? It's not surprising... It's scary, it's painful, but not surprising... What? Do you think, Mr. Haron, that there are too many dead cities for one country?... (Viter 2023: 376).

This strategy is not designed for heroes and potential warriors, but for a large number of ordinary people caught off guard by the war, who cannot immediately orient themselves and make any decisions. They are frightened by the intensity with which hell has burst into their lives, but it is in this uncertain and suspended state that they must develop their own model of new relationships with the world and with themselves.

Strategy 2: Premature Ordeals

If the boundaries between the worlds are significantly shifting, and the metaphysical dying/death of a person occurs while he or she is still alive, then the ordeal – "the trials that threaten the soul after death, but before the final decision of its fate at the Last Judgment" (Averyntsev 2007: 155) – as a natural stage of transition in the Orthodox Christian tradition is experienced not by souls that have departed from their dead bodies, but by physically alive people. The peculiarity of the ordeal is that the soul atones for its sins by encountering demons whose will it fulfilled during life.

In his play *Monologue of a Survivor*, Andriy Bondarenko conveys the emotional feeling of the beginning of the great war as the premature death of souls contained in living human bodies:

Each of us had already
been killed that morning.
We, as we were, are no more.
We are dead.
On 24 February two thousand twenty-two,
a neighbouring country killed us all (Bondarenko 2022 (1))

In the new ordeals of human souls associated with the horrors of war, the cargo forms of medieval *death games* associated with public executions and *devil's games* with their blasphemous carnival nature (Klekovkin 2006: 163, 168) are merged, losing their playful character and acquiring new configurations. We see this, for example, in an episode of the play *Russian Roulette Marathon* by Kateryna Penkova, in which people run to a bunker between air strikes in Mariupol: the episode itself is labeled a *horror movie* (Penkova 2023: 24) – because in this diabolical Brownian motion, parents cannot find their own children, wounded pregnant women run, children scream, many with horrific wounds and torn off body parts are left lying and screaming or hopelessly begging for help, and such ordeals are difficult both for those who are left behind and not rescued, and for those who manage to run to the bunker but can never erase this episode from their own memory.

In Neda Nezhdana's play *The Closed Sky*, four women go through traumatic personal ordeals and initially avoid talking about their own traumatic stories, as each of them considers herself guilty of the deaths of her family members. The need to communicate in a dark, enclosed space without windows or doors (the space itself resembles the eternal gloom behind the gates of death) initially overwhelms the women, who prefer to remain silent about what has happened to each of them since the outbreak of full-scale war, but the stage situation itself forces them to take turns speaking.

In Oleg Mikhailov's play *The Sea Will Remain*, a family, including Him and Her, goes through the ordeal. They also live with a goose, which the romantic She perceives as a bird, and the pragmatic He perceives as a future dinner if it is fried and served with apples. The family has run out of food. The shelling causes plaster to fall off the walls of the house, and towards the end there is a lot of it: it is obvious that the time measured for the family by the inexorable hourglass is coming to an end.

Before the February of 2022, many contemporary Ukrainian playwrights had no prejudice against cultural communication with their Russian theatrical and drama colleagues. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, many have been ashamed of such past contacts, and playwrights have united in the artistic initiatives *Nevyshnevyi Sad (Not-Cherry Orchard)* and *Bez Nyh (Without them)*, designed to publicly demonstrate their renunciation not only of contacts with Russian art, but also of the idea that *good* Russians could exist. That is why in the new texts of these playwrights, Russians are *dehumanized* and appear as "orcs" (*The Cross* by Tetyana Kitsenko), "urkas" (*Snuff* by Andriy Bondarenko), "*Rusnia*" (*Not About Raccoon* by Iryna Harets), "katsaps" (*How Not to Become a Katsap* by Oksana Hrytsenko), and in Oksana Savchenko's text *Big Deal* they are visually depicted as ugly and dirty creatures with rotten teeth, always wearing stolen underpants and climbing into the liquid of an unflushed, stinking toilet with their bare hands.

This strategy allows playwrights to create spaces for characters to rethink themselves, to adjust their ideas about life and its meaning, to renounce the template of abstract humanism, and to reconsider their own social and creative priorities

Strategy 3: Opening Worlds between Worlds

Other models of transition, formed under the influence of the full-scale invasion, allow dramatic characters to enter worlds between worlds, stay and continue to exist in them. This is especially true in the perception of mass deaths or the death of loved ones, as it allows us to talk not about death but about other dimensions of existence, removing tragedy and hopelessness

and creating the illusion of probable worlds in which the human journey continues.

The characters in Oleg Mikhailov's play *The Sea Will Remain* find themselves in such an interworld: first, *She* is blown up by a mine, and then *He* moves in. No one in our world hears or sees what is happening *there*, but from *there* the interworld is perceived only as a continuation of *our* world.

The most striking example of numerous worlds between worlds is found in Volodymyr Rafeyenko's play *Mobile Waves of Being*. In one world, there are the parents of a young Kyivan woman, Mariana, who was killed by the first Russian missile in Kyiv on February 24, 2022: they communicate with each other, hear their daughter, but she is unable to hear them. The second world is inhabited by angels and archangels, with whom Vasya Tsvit communicates before going to bed. His imaginary interlocutor, grandfather Danylo Andriyovych, comes to Vasya's room out of nowhere and leaves him a Bible on his bed: Vasya's wife does not see or hear the grandfather and thinks that her husband has gone mad and is talking to himself. In the third world lives the father of a young man, Viktor, an ethnic Russian who was killed in Kharkiv almost at the same time as Mariana's parents: he even manages to talk from the screen in the absence of mobile communication; in the fourth world, there is Ophelia, who exists in the imagination of the crazy migrant Kolya Khromyi, but who is seen and heard by the intoxicated Serhiy, and later by Halya, and eventually by everyone who stayed in the dachas; in the fifth world, there is Kazymyr the raven. Gradually, more and more dead people appear in the new interworlds, and then the line between the world of the living and the world of the dead is blurred, and the illusion of a theatre arises, in which the logical question is: "*Mariana*: Has life already ended?" (Rafieienko 2023: 86).

This strategy, thanks to its obvious mystical and playful potential, allows us to talk about inevitable losses without excessive emotion, to accept the reality of war and to live after the losses.

As we can see, contemporary Ukrainian drama during a full-scale war with a huge number of human casualties comprehends dying and death mainly in structural and semantic categories that fit into three basic cultural models: the eternal battle between Good and Evil, the totality of war as initiation, and new rites of passage. Each model operates with its own textual strategies, and due to them the concepts of *dying* and *death* acquire versatility and philosophical depth in dramatic texts, which allows us to speak of Ukrainian drama of full-scale war as a qualitatively new artistic material.

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