





The story of the ProEnglish Theatre: How the small English- speaking theatre in Kyiv turned into a bomb shelter

As told by its artistic director
Alex Borovenskiy

The ProEnglish Theatre of Ukraine is a small independent theatre located in Kyiv. We are the only Ukrainian theatre producing performances in English. Our story started in 2014 as a studio theatre experimenting with different acting techniques not so widely known in Ukraine: Augusto Boal, Peter Brook, Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler, Jerzy Grotowski, ... It took us four years to get to the level of a professional theatre and we only started inviting professional actors to star in our projects in 2018. Before the war, the ProEnglish Theatre consisted of about twenty professional actors and top graduates from our ProEnglish Drama School. The theatre was quite well received among the Ukrainian theatre community. We conducted theatre workshops for the National Union of Theatre Artists of Ukraine and took part in different theatre festivals and seminars. Being an English-speaking theatre, the ProEnglish Theatre has actively developed its international story and our performances have since been invited to theatre festivals in Egypt and Germany.

In 2021, between pandemic waves, we staged *Forgetting Othello*, a modern interpretation of a classic story in which William Shakespeare's words were intertwined with monologues by refugees from Syria and African countries. We conceived it as a performance for Western European audiences. Back then, we didn't believe that the issue of a refugee crises would have any relevance in Ukraine. Little did we know...

In early 2022, we premiered *Hedda Gabbler* by Henrik Ibsen and started working on two new performances by modern Polish and Norwegian playwrights. The Theatre was swiftly recovering from the Covid outbreak. Our plan was to establish Ukrainian theatre in Europe by performing quality performances in English. But then the war started and within minutes everything changed. On February 24th, we were supposed to have two rehearsals and an acting class. That very evening, we were putting up beds in our theatre and erecting barricades outside on the street.

The ProEnglish Theatre is located in the basement of a five-storey residential building – and that's exactly where some of the actors, directors and myself went on Day 1. The sirens didn't rest, everywhere you went you heard news about Russian tanks heading for the capital. That's when we first recorded our video messages to the world – on the porch of our theatre to the sound of sirens. We recorded messages in English, German and Spanish. It felt very important to speak to the world at this time of crisis. It still does. Within a few hours, many more people came to us

– friends of friends, other artists, animals whose owners had left the city... By the afternoon, local people from the neighbourhood also started coming over. The first night, we hosted around 40 people in our theatre. People slept in rehearsal spaces and performance areas. The place where we used to entertain people turned into a place of refuge. The next day, we started getting news from our actors who were trapped in other parts of the city. One of them, Kateryna Khozroshyna, had found shelter in the suburbs of Kyiv. The internet connection was often interrupted, but she managed to send us the poem *Today my heartbeat is uneven*, which she wrote on the first day of the invasion. That very evening, we recorded this poem with another actress, Alina Zievakova. Since then, we have become ART Shelter. We have created art every evening, in the late hours, during curfew, after we finish our volunteering work around the city. We have created art in-between delivering and unloading humanitarian help, in-between taking people to the train station. We have created art among the chaos and turmoil of war.

Theatres around the world reached out to us immediately. Since Day 1 we have been receiving word or support from old friends and theatres we had never heard of before. Vienna, Italy, Chicago, Argentina, Nepal – to name just a few. Every day we were talking to different artists and organisations. That's when we came into contact with the European Association of Independent Performing Arts. Meeting and speaking to the representatives of EAIIPA turned our focus

ART Shelter life of ProEnglish Theatre
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from ourselves to the bigger issue of Ukrainian independent theatre. And so, we started talking to and connecting with various theatres affected by the war. We revived the activities of the Association of Ukrainian Independent Theatre. It felt tremendously important to bring together artistic people during this ordeal. These days, the Association of Ukrainian Independent Theatre serves as a medium for Ukrainian theatres and artists affected by the war, to give them access to various opportunities.

Meanwhile, we resumed rehearsals on two performances in the corridors and closet rooms of the theatre-turned-bomb shelter during curfew hours. One of our directors, Tanya Shelepko, staged the 15-min play *The New World Order* by Harold Pinter. This play was meant to be part of a collective work comprising several independent pieces directed by different people, but the war put this project on hold. Tanya had to adapt her original plan and change the cast and setting. Two of the now three actors were with us in the ART Shelter, and another actor was hiding in the Lviv bomb shelters – so that’s how *The New World Order* was staged: a combination of live performance, live music (by a piano player living with us in the ART Shelter) and an actor performing via Zoom. We premiered *The New World Order* live and online on March 27th – International Theatre Day. At about the same time, I also started working on a new performance. There’s this book in our theatre library by Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief*, which I had read several times before. The story of its main character, Liesel Meminger, had been

stuck in my head. It felt so relevant: The story of a little girl in the little German town of Molching between the years of 1939–1945, and that little town being constantly bombed since 1943... It felt like history was repeating itself. I adapted *The Book Thief* into a 7-page mono-performance with actress Anabell Ramirez. It premiered as *The Book of Sirens* at our ART Shelter – in the same space we lived and slept in – on April 9th. We didn’t change or create a special setting but performed *The Book of Sirens* among the improvised bedsteads of ten people. On the day of the premiere, those ten people were our audience – plus about ten thousand people from all over the world. We streamed the premiere worldwide and different theatres from different countries were hosting our live stream. The whole world watched.

We had to include a special content warning for Ukrainians though:

” In this performance we’re using Soviet radio announcements and the sound of sirens, both of which can be quite traumatic for Ukrainian audiences.

A few days after, we hosted “Why Art Thou?”, a zoom discussion with different artists who watched the show from all over the world. The response was impressive: This ability to speak about the war without turning it into a documentary made the story of *The Book of Sirens* universally relatable.

These days, Anabell is in Spain, showing *The Book of Sirens* in Bilbao, Madrid and Alicante. After that, we're planning a tour in Germany. The story of Liesel Meminger learning to read in a bomb shelter in the little German town of Molching in 1943 staged in a bomb shelter in Kyiv in 2022 should be seen by a German audience. The "Never Again" – message could not be clearer. In autumn, *The Book of Sirens* is also scheduled to go to New York.

Meanwhile, in Kyiv, we have resumed the activities of our ProEnglish Drama School, which had been completely on hold since February 24th. We used to teach acting in English for adults and teens, we used to improve their soft skills, their use of the English language and help them realise their dream of being on stage. The war in my country made all that impossible. So now, in May, we are ready to start again with our new RAW series (Relief Artistic Workshops) in which our acting coaches aim to deal with post-traumatic war experiences by working on and exploring Augusto Boal techniques, playback theatre and Les Kurbas principles. In a way, these workshops will help us deal with PTSD.

Finally, I have also started work on a new performance. Its working title is *Thursday 5am*, and it's my first attempt at documentary theatre. The performance will consist of statements by Ukrainians about their experiences of the first day of the war. Thursday, February 24th, at 5am is when the war started for all Ukrainians. The performance will be a comedy. I want ART to teach me how to laugh in the face of war.



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