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Contemporary Theatre Review

ISSN: 1048-6801 (Print) 1477-2264 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/gctr20

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To cite this article: Amanda Stuart Fisher & Valeriy Simonchuk (2026) Antigone as Witness: Theatre Making as a Response to Russia's War on Ukraine, Contemporary Theatre Review, 36:1, 50-70, DOI: 10.1080/10486801.2026.2617517

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2026.2617517

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Published online: 07 Jul 2026.

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Contemporary Theatre Review, 2026
Vol. 36, No. 1, 50–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2026.2617517

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Abstract

This article builds on an ongoing dialogue between the co-authors initiated in May 2022 when Valeriy Simonchuk a Kyiv-based theatre maker, contacted Amanda Stuart Fisher to open up a dialogue about testimonial performance and the challenges of making theatre at a time of war. During the next two years, the conversation developed, to examine how theatre can bear witness to war and the problematics and possibilities of using personal testimonies to respond to the violence and suffering of civilians in Ukraine. In this article, we examine *Antigone: Post-Mortem*, which was devised and directed by Valeriy Simonchuk, performed by Alina Zevakova and responds to the massacre of Ukrainian civilians in the town of Bucha, where on Yablunska Street alone at least 36 people were killed by russian soldiers as part of a "cleansing operation", involving systematic executions, torture and instances of the rape of women and girls. Drawing on interviews with members of the local community and through an exploration of *Antigone* by Sophocles, the performance responds to this event, using the image of unburied bodies and the act of witnessing itself as a means of raising questions about the suffering endured as a result of war and theatre's capacity to respond to this. Through our examination of the play's creative process and its reception by audiences in Ukraine and beyond, we examine how a canonical text can generate a productive framework for a theatre of witnessing to emerge.

Keywords: Testimony; verbatim; memory; war; Ukraine

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A few months after the commencement of russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, an email from Valeriy Simonchuk, a theatre maker in Kyiv, arrived in the inbox of Amanda Stuart Fisher, a researcher based at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London. Having come across her research on the limits of verbatim theatre on the internet, Valeriy wanted to talk about how he might make theatre at a time of war. Since that first email, Amanda and Valeriy have talked a lot, met in person, and presented a paper together. This article is an extension of this ongoing conversation, enabling us to further think about how theatre can bear witness to ongoing conflict and what sorts of politics, ethics, and dramaturgies should inform such practices.

When Valeriy's email arrived in May 2022, Amanda knew very little about the day-to-day realities of the conflict. She had, however, observed the war's progress and its ongoing impact on the Ukrainian people through journalistic reports on television and radio and through social media channels, which regularly transmitted images and filmed footage of the violence wrought by russian forces on Ukrainian communities. The war in Ukraine has been described as the most documented conflict in history,[1] one reason for this is that russian forces have targeted so many civilian areas,[2] consequently large numbers of Ukraine's civilian population have suffered the impacts of what Putin had initially described as a mere 'military operation'. Rather than being a short-term military campaign, however, the re-invasion has quickly become 'the greatest conventional war in Europe since 1945'[3] and, as such, much of the violence and destruction wrought in civilian occupied areas has been instantly captured and shared via hand-held mobile phone cameras. Yet despite this mass documentation, the filmed footage often fails in some critical way to capture the lived experience of this conflict. All too often, people who have suffered enormous losses due to war are presented in images framed through a lens of, following Luc Boltanski, what might be described as a 'politics of pity',[4] where individuality is flattened out and acts of resistance, rage, and defiance become subsumed into a narrative of suffering and powerlessness. In her examination of the mediatisation by televised footage of the distant suffering of people who have endured war and other disasters, Lilie Chouliaraki argues that through the mediation of such events, journalists and news producers generate material that is shaped not only by what is 'comprehensible' to the presumed spectator but what is deemed 'ethically acceptable'.[5] As a consequence, the footage of the suffering of others comes to be shaped by normative conceptions of 'how the spectator should relate to the sufferer and what we should do about the suffering'.[6] Televised coverage of war tends then to establish a binary distinction between the spectator and the spectated. Those who consume television images in the relative safety of their homes are positioned as separate from the 'zone of suffering' through footage that 'deprives the suffering "others" of their own sovereignty as human beings'[7] and represents their experiences through discourses of victimology. To create theatre that responds to war, and which draws on

1. Stephen Fidler and Thomas Grove, 'Smartphones are Changing the War in Ukraine', *Wall Street Journal*, February 16, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/smartphones-are-changing-the-war-in-ukraine-adb37ba1 (accessed May 19, 2025).
2. Emma Graham-Harrison and Artem Mazhulin, 'When Russia targets ordinary homes: the attacks that mean no one is safe in Ukraine', *The Guardian*, April 30, 2023 (accessed June 9, 2025).
3. Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War* (London: Allen Lane, 2023), xix.
4. Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, trans. Graham D. Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
5. Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 2.
6. Ibid., 3.
7. Ibid., 5.

the testimony of witnesses to do so, opens up a potent way of generating a counter narrative to this mass mediatisation of suffering. A theatre of testimony can develop a more direct engagement with an event by resisting bland, normative, and pre-determined narratives. As Alison Forsyth argues, by moving 'beyond a merely fact-bearing exercise' testimonial performance has the potential to enable the spectator to engage with these events '*differently*'.[8]

Valeriy's decision to return to Kyiv to make theatre was not only driven by a desire to represent the events of the war *differently*, he also wanted to determine whether theatre making might help a community process the suffering of the war and heal in some way. Valery's own life had been irrevocably changed as a result of the invasion and making theatre at such a time had taken on an important political and ethical dimension. His own adaptation to the war had taken place through a series of stages. Initially, together with others from his community, he had been patrolling the streets of Kyiv at night, trying to keep the area safe. He then worked in other parts of Ukraine as a volunteer engaged in counter propaganda, during which time he gained employment interviewing internally displaced people arriving from Mariupol. Later, having returned to Kyiv, he worked with international journalists, documenting the violence of the invasion and its impact on civilians living in the region. This documentation and the testimonies he recorded generated an important counternarrative to the reports emerging from the Kremlin, who were issuing denials about the violence being inflicted upon Ukrainian civilians by russian forces.[9]

From its very inception then, the project of making theatre in response to the war had an important ethical dimension, for it became a means of recounting what had really happened and of bearing witness to what the civilian communities had endured. Later, Valeriy found himself based in Bucha, a town that had been badly hit by the violence of the occupation when in March 2022, a notorious and terrible massacre occurred and russian soldiers, who had entered the town, shot hundreds of Ukrainian civilians. It was an act of violence that led to accusations of war crimes and genocide from the international community, and it was with these events in mind that Valeriy approached the project of making theatre when he returned to Kyiv. Amidst the suffering and pain that surrounded daily life in Ukraine at that point, he wanted to find a way of bearing witness to what was taking place, to do something positive with the testimonies he had collected, and put theatre to use for positive change, healing, and mutual support.

In this article, we examine the conceptualisation and making of *Antigone: Post-Mortem*, a performance that developed out of our dialogue and was directed and written by Valeriy. Taking inspiration from Sophocles' s play, *Antigone: Post-Mortem* responds to the events that took place at Bucha. By drawing on the figure of Antigone, the play opens up poignant ways of staging processes of witnessing, remembering, and mourning. In our examination of this production we explore the making of the play and consider how theatre can engage with the intersections of witnessing and trauma at a time of war, how such works might bear witness to what is not remembered within the trauma of conflict, and in what ways theatre making can address losses that are yet to be mourned.[10]

8. Alison Forsyth, 'Introduction: Testimony in Performance: Memory in Action', in *The Methuen Drama Anthology of Testimonial Plays*, ed. Alison Forsyth (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 1–2 (original emphasis).

9. Vyacheslav Madiyevskyy, 'Deadliest civilian attacks in Russia's invasion of Ukraine', *Reuters*, October 5, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/deadliest-civilian-attacks-russias-invasion-ukraine-2023-10-05/ (accessed June 9, 2025).

10. This article has been shaped by the specific contingencies of each of our different circumstances and our different geographical locations. In order to acknowledge these contingencies, we maintain the dialogical framework of a conversation throughout this article and have indicated this to the reader by specifying which author is addressing them.

Dramaturgies of Trauma: Navigating the Ethics and Politics of Bearing Witness (Amanda)

Valeriy's first email in May 2022 raised many questions for me about the problematics and ethical demands of making theatre when living within an ongoing conflict and I found myself reflecting on the limits and possibilities and the role and responsibilities of theatre and the creative arts more broadly in the face of ongoing loss and suffering. I was also struck by Valeriy's own account of his experience of witnessing the war, which was framed through a navigation of his own lived experience and the viscerally traumatic events that had been recounted to him by the people he had interviewed in Bucha, Irpin, and Borodyanka. In his first email he said:

> What I have seen in the past few months I cannot possibly describe with words. Let's just say, there's a vast sea of pain, hatred, trauma and dehumanisation wherever you go. (May 6, 2022)

While my own research up to this point had engaged with questions about theatre's capacity to bear witness to an event of trauma, my focus had largely addressed events of traumatic violence that had occurred in the past. Yet here I was being invited to consider how theatre might witness events of violence that are taking place at a time of ongoing aggression, during a war that is not over. The task of talking about such a project came with enormous responsibility, not least because I also felt somewhat removed from the reality of these experiences. The re-enactment of personal testimony potentially seemed to offer a potent way of responding ethically to the lived experience of war. Yet, this also raised questions about the role of theatre at a time of conflict and invasion and how theatre should respond to acts of witnessing that remain too painful to hear or too raw to be represented through words.

While testimonial performance takes many forms and approaches, ultimately it is always constructed upon an ethical pledge to bear witness to an event. This pledge is underpinned by a testimonial promise to speak honestly and in a direct and unmediated way about what has happened and what has been experienced. In this sense, the authority of this form of theatre is its capacity to open up new ways of understanding an event, because testimonial theatre is constructed upon the 'radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden' of the witness.[11] As I have explored elsewhere, there is an ethical demand at the heart of testimonial performances.[12] This demand implicates both the listener and speaker in the moment of performance, for the witness who addresses an audience either as themselves or through an actor seeks a listener who will acknowledge the witness's words as testimony and will therefore affirm the truths that are being uttered. The performance of testimony then is informed by an ethical appeal to the other which is staged in the moment of re-enactment. When theatre makers draw on another person's testimony to generate a dramaturgical structure, they speak on behalf of the witness and must therefore commit to a process that honours the act of testimonial truth telling through the making of the performance itself. As such, the relationship between primary witness and theatre maker arguably

11. Shoshana Felman, 'Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds., Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3.

12. Amanda Stuart Fisher, *Performing the Testimonial: Rethinking Verbatim Dramaturgies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

becomes framed around a dynamic of trust and care. When seeking a listener who will hear and affirm an act of attestation, the witness has no choice but to place themselves in the hands of another, and as such, sharing one's testimony becomes a process rooted in relationships of trust which require care and responsible forms of navigation. Testimonial theatre then becomes a process framed by a critical ethical demand, requiring the theatre maker to affirm the witness's words as testimony and to invite the audience to attend to this in good faith. This concept of the ethical demand is rooted in the philosophy of Knud Ejler Løgstrup, who views such a relationship through the lens of care for the other, leading him to argue that an ethical demand emerges when we are required to 'take care of the life which trust has placed in our hands'.[13] In this sense, I might also suggest that through the act of sharing their testimony, the witness demands care from the theatre maker.

13. Knud Ejler Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, trans. Theodor I. Jensen (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press), 18.

It is this ethical dimension, I argue, that distinguishes testimonial performance from verbatim theatre. For verbatim theatre tends to use the testimonies of interview subjects to authenticate or evidence a particular argument or perspective on an event. In this context, testimony is used as part of a predetermined dramatic narrative, which is usually pre-shaped by the playwright. Testimonial theatre, however, emerges out of an act of bearing witness and as such it foregrounds the 'act of witnessing itself' placing 'the experience of the witness at the heart of the dramaturgical process'.[14] Testimonial theatre moves beyond a simple re-iteration of the facts of what happened and instead allows the act of witnessing itself to determine and shape how the dramaturgy is framed and what it addresses.

14. Stuart Fisher, *Performing the Testimonial*, 103.

However, the traumatic presents a very specific challenge to testimonial practices. For as theorists engaging with psychoanalytic accounts of the trauma have argued, by its very definition, the traumatic tends to evade language and communicability. Instead, the trauma of an event is encountered, as Cathy Caruth has argued, as a 'belated' experience,[15] which emerges unbidden after the event has occurred. The affect of trauma, in other words, is occluded from consciousness in some critical way and emerges instead through encounters with involuntary repetitions that haunt the subject, revealing 'a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known'.[16] It is through an engagement with the unknowability and belatedness of trauma that it becomes possible to identify some of the pressing ethical questions that confront the theatre maker who seeks to respond in some way to a traumatic event. For if the trauma of an event eludes language and communicability, in what ways can theatre ethically represent it? Furthermore, if the theatre maker represents testimony in order to enact a mode of witnessing, how can this be undertaken ethically in the context of the trauma? How, in other words, can theatre find a way of responding to the event of trauma that can engage in between the sayable and the unsayable? And how can theatre seek to directly address the event while also attending to the silence at the centre of the traumatic?

15. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press), 7.

16. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 92.

In her examination of Lanzmann's seminal film *Shoah* (1985), which drew exclusively on the testimonies of those who had lived through the events of the Holocaust, Shoshana Felman reflects on how art itself enacts a form of witnessing. Lanzmann's film, she suggests, explores 'the limits of the witness' and of witnessing itself.[17] In so doing, she suggests, Lanzmann consciously

17. Felman, 'The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds., Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 205.

engages with the implications of positioning himself – and the viewer – as witnesses to what is being testified to. By positioning the viewer as a witness 'who *sees* and *hears*, but *cannot understand* the significance of what is going on until the later intervention'[18] Lanzmann's film, Felman argues, engages with the tensions between what is and is not communicable within the act of bearing witness. In this sense, we might suggest that Lanzmann points to the silence within the encounter of the traumatic event through his staging of the incomprehension of trauma and through film's exploration of what is unsayable but what continually returns to haunt the witness after the event.

Yet while silence and incommunicability might be understood as constitutive to acts of witnessing that address events of trauma, silence is symptomatic of an attempt to manipulate the historiography of the past through a politics of memory. In other words, in some contexts, silence is an indicator of *non-memory*, when certain events are not memorialised or remembered because they are politically inconvenient. Memory studies theorist Roma Sendyka develops a compelling account of the concept of non-memory in Central and Eastern Europe. Arguing that discursive processes of non-memory are to be distinguished from a 'general feature of "being forgotten"'.[19] Sendyka examines how incidents of genocidal violence, occurring in the past century, are not exactly forgotten but remain as sites of what is *unremembered*. Non-memory, she argues, is not synonymous with forgetting, but instead relates to how the transmission of the past is repressed or withheld by social processes of collective memory. In this sense, non-memory denotes how 'what is remembered coexists with what is repressed and what is not yet assimilated' and points to how processes of social memory overlook and neglect 'some component of the facts concerning what has happened'.[20] While Sendyka addresses her theorisation to sites of violence that are not memorialised with plaques or other memorials, the concept of non-memory is also useful when thinking about how violent events in Ukraine have been disavowed or contested in some way by the russian state. This returns us, of course, to the site of Bucha and the violence by russian forces in March 2022. Human Rights Watch observers, who entered the town after the russian forces withdrew from the area in April, found 'extensive evidence of summary executions, other unlawful killings, enforced disappearances, and torture, all of which would constitute war crimes and potential crimes against humanity'.[21] Yet, while these atrocities were reported on the front pages of newspapers in the United Kingdom, such as *The Guardian* and *The Times*, the Kremlin refuted these accusations, describing reports of a massacre 'as a monstrous forgery'.[22]

The battle for truth in the historiography of the invasion leads Yurii Latysh (2023), a Ukrainian memory studies scholar, to argue that the war has made memory a highly politicised terrain. When russia initiated its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Latysh argues, it launched not only a 'conventional war but also a war in the sphere of historical memory' and, as the war has progressed, russia has continued to 'use and abuse "historical arguments" to justify its aggression against Ukraine'.[23] The struggle for the historiography of Ukraine, as Latysh points out, has a long history and arguably, as he suggests, all the tragedies that have confronted the Ukrainian people, 'such as world wars and genocides' are 'considered a consequence of the absence of their own state'.[24]

18. Ibid., 212 (original emphasis).

19. Roma Sendyka, 'Non-memory: Remembering Beyond the Discursive and the Symbolic', *Memory Studies* 15, no. 3 (2022): 523.

20. Sendyka, 'Non-memory', 525.

21. 'Ukraine: Russian Forces' Trail of Death in Bucha', Human Rights Watch, April 21, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/21/ukraine-Russian-forces-trail-death-bucha (accessed June 9, 2025).

22. Guy Faulconbridge, 'Russia Denies Killing Civilians in Ukraine's Bucha', *Reuters*, April 3, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-denies-killing-civilians-ukraines-bucha-2022-04-03/ (accessed June 9, 2025).

23. Yurii Latysh, '"Get Away from Moscow!": Main Trends of Ukraine's Politics of Memory During the Russo-Ukrainian War', in *IEŚ Policy Papers: Russia's War in Ukraine: Implications for the Politics of History in Central and Eastern Europe* (Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowej [Institute of Central Europe], 2023), 31–45.

24. Ibid. 34.

Historical politics, in this context, then becomes a vital means of legitimizing the existence of Ukraine as an independent state. This complex political landscape of memory also inscribes itself into any theatre process that seeks to respond to the events of the war. To draw on testimonies from the community at Bucha who suffered the violence of the massacre is not only therefore a process of staging a counter-narrative to russia's propaganda but also becomes part of the struggle to resist the existential components of russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The role of theatre making within Ukraine has therefore had to shift and change in response to the ongoing violence and existential threats facing the country. Writing a few months after the commencement of the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian theatre historian and critic Maiia Harbuziuk argued that in these early months Ukrainian theatres adopted a 'humanitarian mission', taking on the role of a 'volunteer', supplying shelter, supporting refugees, and providing other forms of assistance by playing 'an integral part of a vast volunteer network helping Ukraine'.[25] Gradually, however, as the conflict continued, theatres returned to making theatre, while having to re-imagine what this might mean at a time of war. Harbuziuk describes the role of theatre at this time as becoming 'a place of collective therapy and mutual support'. Writing several months after Harbuziuk, Ukrainian theatre scholar Hanna Veselovska identified how Ukrainian theatres inaugurated shifts in their repertoire as means to respond to the evolution of the war. Drawing attention to the importance of new writing at this time, Veselovska identifies some of the different ways that playwrights responded. Previously, she argues, Ukrainian playwrights had 'not gained much recognition with mainstream academic theatres' as a result of 'their uncensored vocabulary, unbiased critical thinking or provocative underground tendencies'.[26] However, at a time when russian forces were destroying many theatre buildings,[27] the new work of playwrights became an important means of communicating to the rest of the world that 'Ukrainians were alive, both under bombs and under occupation, and on the frontlines of the war'.[28] The playwright Iryna Harets's online collection of plays, entitled Руський Воєнний Корабль, Іді На*уй! [russian warship, go f*uck yourself], is cited by Veselovska as being an example of new writing that inaugurated this type of new work, along with a number of other playwrights such as: 'Olena Astasyeva, Ihor Bilyc, Andriy Bondarenko, Oksana Hrytsenko, Nina Zakhozhenko, Lena Lyagushonkova, Maryna Smilianets, Lyudmila Tymoshenko, and Vitaliy Chenskyi'.[29] Many of these works were translated into English as part of 'The Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings', an initiative launched by John Freedman, which meant that the work of Ukrainian playwrights could be accessed by wider audiences across the world.[30]

Other theatre-making projects in Ukraine have been developed with the aim of supporting those who had direct experience of combat. In April 2024, for example, Theatre of Veterans, co-founded by playwright Maksym Kurochkin, was launched with the intention or working with veterans to help them process their experiences of war, through storytelling and playwriting. In his solo autobiographical play, *Explosion*,

25. Maiia Harbuziuk, 'Theatre as a Humanitarian Mission: Ukraine's Experience 2022', *Critical Stages*, no. 25 (June 2022), https://www.critical-stages.org/25/theatre-as-a-%CE%B7umanitarian-mission-ukraines-experience-2022/ (accessed May 14, 2025).

26. Hanna Veselovska, 'Living in the War: The Ukrainian Theatre Since the Russian Invasion', *Critical Stages*, no. 26 (December 2022), https://www.critical-stages.org/26/living-in-the-war-the-ukrainian-theatre-since-the-Russian-invasion/ (accessed May 14, 2025).

27. One of the most deadly attacks on Ukrainian theatres occurred on 16th March 2022, when russian forces completely destroyed the Mariupol Theatre, despite knowing that many civilians were sheltering there, killing more than a dozen people and injuring many more (see https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/ukraine-deadly-mariupol-theatre-strike-a-clear-war-crime-by-Russian-forces-new-investigation/). Numerous other theatres have also been destroyed or damaged, including the theatre in Severodonestk, the Kyiv Small Opera House, Irpin Cultural Centre, the Chernihiv Drama Theatre and many more.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. For a further discussion about the development of Ukrainian new writing, please see the article by Molly Flynn, Olena Myhashko and Ielizaveta Oliinyk in this issue.

veteran Yurii Vetkin who was injured in a mortar attack in his hometown Chernihiv, explores his experience of the attack, in which he lost his leg examining 'the emotions that come to a person fighting for their life'.[31] Kurochkin argues that this project plays an important therapeutic role in 'listening to veterans and valuing their stories',[32] contributing to the process of healing from the trauma of combat. The process of telling one's story, he suggests, is 'a matter of survival' because 'veterans need to tell their stories, or others will tell them for them, and inaccurately'.[33]

Alongside these more therapeutic interventions, in the years following the full-scale invasion, theatre makers in Ukraine have also become more experimental with form and content, creating new work that has engaged with what Veselovksa describes as 'hyper-modern drama'.[34] This innovation of form has arguably been adopted in order to address the existential 'hopelessness and meaninglessness' that shapes life lived under occupation.[35] Part of this turn towards hyper-modern drama has been characterised by the use of documentary and testimonial practices, which draw on 'first-hand memories or key participants in critical events, Facebook posts and journalistic interviews' to recount and interrogate key events in the course of the war.[36] A similar observation is made by Ukrainian theatre scholar Iryna Chuzhynova, who draws attention to the emergence of 'documentary or semi-documentary performances' in Ukraine at this time, which she argues, have become a means by which Ukrainian theatre records and bears witness to key historical events.[37] One such play was Я, війна і пластикова граната [Me, *War and a Plastic Grenade*] by Nina Zakhozhenko, which 'was written in a very short time in the spring of 2022 focusing on the war in different regions of Ukraine'.[38] One part of this play, like *Antigone: Post mortem*, also focused on events that took place in the town of Bucha. In this part of the play, in a section entitled, Я норм [*I'm Ok*], Zakhozhenko focusses on the life of teenagers right before and during the occupation of Bucha.[39]

Theatre's capacity to bear witness and actively resist processes of unremembering, by interrogating the silence and unspoken elements of a traumatic, historical event, was discussed by Harbuzyuk in her last public talk in 2023.[40] In her discussion of what she describes as an 'index of silence',[41] Harbuzuk drew attention to the way that certain events of violence in Ukraine have become sites of unremembering which are then not addressed by the cultural sector until many years later. Defining the 'index of silence', as a means of identifying 'the number of years separating the collective trauma of Ukrainian society from the moment of its cultural representation in the public sphere',[42] Harbuzyuk draws attention to the silence surrounding some of key traumatic events in Ukraine's history such as the Holodomor, the Second World War, and Chernobyl. When Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, she argues, these events were transmitted only through 'ideologically distorted narratives' where silence was used to 'hide the truth'.[43] Silence in the face of these traumatic events, as Harbuzyuk goes on to point out, was 'determined by the power of state discourse' and therefore might better be understood as a mode of '*silencing*' in which

31. Vetkin quoted in Artem Moskalenko, 'Healing Through Theatre: How Veterans Theatrer project helps veterans recover through storytelling', *Rubryka*, October 31, 2024, https://rubryka.com/en/article/teatr-veteraniv/.
32. Artem Moskalenko, 'Healing Through Theatre: How Veterans Theatrer project helps veterans recover through storytelling', *Rubryka*, October 31, 2024, https://rubryka.com/en/article/teatr-veteraniv/.
33. Kurochkin quoted in Artem Moskalenko, 'Healing Through Theatre: How Veterans Theatrer project helps veterans recover through storytelling', *Rubryka*, October 31, 2024, https://rubryka.com/en/article/teatr-veteraniv/.
34. Hanna Veselovska, 'Living in the War: The Ukrainian Theatre Since the Russian Invasion', *Critical Stages*, no. 26 (December 2022), https://www.critical-stages.org/26/living-in-the-war-the-ukrainian-theatre-since-the-Russian-invasion/ (accessed May 14, 2025).
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Iryna Chuzhynova, 'Afterword', *Critical Stages*, no. 28 (December 2023), https://www.critical-stages.org/28/afterword/ (accessed May 14, 2025).
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Maii Harbuzuk died in Lviv, Ukraine in August 2023, aged 58.

the traumatic events of the past were repressed by enacting a form of 'epistemic violence'.[44] Harbuzyuk examines how the first Ukrainian play to be written about the Holodomor 'from the point of view of a tragic individual and group experience' was not staged until 2009, earning it a 'silence index' of 83 years.[45] However, in relation to theatre's response to russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine from 2022 onwards, the situation is more optimistic. As Harbuzyuk states, theatre's responses to this act of aggression has been immediate and more direct than at other historical periods, leading to a 'silence index of 0', which is indicative of 'the epistemic freedom' within Ukraine's contemporary social context.[46] As Harbuzuk argues, it is this capacity to 'work with trauma while continuing to be in it' that makes Ukrainian theatre at this time so unique and so powerful.[47]

Valeriy's visit to Bucha to record testimonies about the community's experiences of the occupation of the russian forces took place only a matter of months after the massacre. Just over a year later in July 2023, a memorial wall was constructed that listed the names of 501 Ukrainian civilians who had lost their lives during this period. When working with the material that would become *Antigone: Post-Mortem*, Valeriy recognised his role was both to document the losses and suffering endured, and also to contribute in some way to processes of healing or what Dominick LaCapra describes as 'working through' this traumatic event.[48] One of the many sources of trauma revealed in these testimonies was that after the massacre many families had been unable to locate or bury their loved ones. This became one of the thematics that informed Valeriy's creative process, for it became clear that theatre making at this time needed to be closely elided to acts of mourning and grieving, vital psycho-social processes that had been interrupted or delayed due to the lack of access to burial and funerary rituals.

Mourning is closely associated with acts of remembering and the process of working through or coming to terms with events of loss and trauma. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur draws on Freudian concepts of mourning and melancholia to argue that mourning should be understood as constituting some kind of a 'reconciliation' with what has been lost. 'What is preserved in mourning', Ricoeur argues, 'is self-esteem' and it is this regard for the self, he suggests, that is lost when we fall into melancholia.[49] Mourning, in other words, through its use of ritualised processes becomes an important means of staving off despair. In his theorisation of how traumatic events are processed and inscribed on the body, the anthropologist Paul Connerton draws attention to how the word 'mourning' is rooted in the concept of care. 'The verb "to care"', Connerton explains, 'used to have a meaning now declared obsolete, namely, "to mourn"'.[50] The act of 'caring', as Connerton explains, was once connected to memory through the idea of mourning'.[51] In other words, we attend and care for those we have lost by engaging in rituals of mourning. These rituals help us to actively remember those who have passed and help us to navigate the transitional process of caring for someone who has moved from life to death. Yet, how is it possible for individuals and communities to mourn what is lost

41. Maya Harbuzuk, 'Overcoming Silence', *Critical Stages* 28 (2023), https://www.critical-stages.org/28/overcoming-silence/.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid (original emphasis).
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
49. Paul Ricoeur, 'Memory and Forgetting', in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in* Philosophy, ed. Mark Dooley and Richard Kearney (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 7.
50. Paul Connerton *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4.
51. Ibid.

when denied the rituals we associate with death? Douglas Davies, who examines the social rituals of death, describes the funeral process as a 'two-phased ritual', with one phase representing 'the removal of the body from the realm of the living' and the second giving 'it status in the realm of the dead'.[52] This leads Davies to argue that while mourning attends to individuated experiences of loss, these death rituals also have a social function and '[serve] social ends even more than they [serve] the private needs of the bereaved'.[53]

In Bucha in 2022, all mourning rituals were placed in suspension as the community sought desperately to identify the location of their loved ones and secure their bodies for burial. Without being able to engage in burial rites, processes of mourning and grieving were interrupted, and the dead remained either unburied or lying in unmarked, uncared-for graves. It was this foreclosure of mourning and the problematic of the unburied body that led Valeriy to engage with Sophocles' play, *Antigone*. As the play makes clear, the act of burial not only connects the living with the dead through processes of mourning and remembering, but it also attends, in some way, to the injustice of life that is taken through violence. We see this in Sophocles' play where Antigone states that the need to bury her brother is not only a personal process of mourning, but is a means of seeking justice:

> Do as you please. I intend to bury my brother,
> And if I die in the attempt, I shall die
> In the knowledge that I have acted justly.[54]

The figure of Antigone has often been mobilised by theatre makers who are addressing the suffering and losses of war. As Erin Mee and Helene Foley point out, in many contemporary adaptations, Antigone is positioned as a 'heroine' because 'she speaks out against injustice and takes action that topples an oppressive regime as represented by Creon'.[55] Mee and Foley argue that *Antigone* is constantly being adapted, translated, and remade in order to 'invoke the political questions raised by the play' and to explore the 'political legacy of its performance tradition'.[56] In this sense, contemporary adaptations of *Antigone* tend not to depict a universal or singular narrative. Rather the character of Antigone and/or the play is constantly re-imagined and 'remade' in order to interrogate the specific political context each adaptation addresses. *Antigone* has a long history of being used to exploring situations of conflict. Bertolt Brecht, for example, set his 1948 adaptation of *Antigone* in World War II, where he explored the desertion of a soldier from the German army and Jean Anouilh's version of the play, which was performed in Paris in 1944, drew parallels with the bravery of the French resistance during Nazi occupation. In more recent years, adaptations of *Antigone* have been used to examine issues of memory, resistance, and personal and collective losses in relation to a wide range wars around the world. *Antigone's Emigration* created by Syrian writer and director Jihan Saad in 2006, for example, examined the suffering of forced displacement and exile caused by the Syrian war. As Edward Zitar discusses, this adaptation had a 'contemporary feel' and explored 'the experience of losing one's homeland' as well as the 'imaginative landscape connected

52. Douglas Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 32.

53. Ibid.

54. Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Don Taylor, 2nd edn (London: Methuen Drama, 2026), 7.

55. Erin B. Mee and Helene P. Foley, 'Mobilizing Antigone', in *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage*, eds. E. B. Mee and H. P. Foley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 28.

56. Ibid., 7.

to one's home'.[57] Similarly, in Nehad Selaiha's analysis of *Antigone in Ramallah … Antigone in Beirut*, performed initially in Egypt by the Al-Hanager theatre group in 2006, she describes how this production mobilised Antigone to examine a number of conflicts across the Middle East. In this production, Selaiha argues, Antigone emerges as a witness both to the suffering of war and to the loss of one's homeland. Describing the production as 'profoundly moving', Selaiha states that rather than coming across 'as an unmitigated condemnation of one party in the conflict in favour of the other' in this production, Antigone seemed to represent 'the land of Palestine itself, or Lebanon or Algeria, or any land torn by internecine conflict and internal feuds'.[58]

In the context of Ukraine, the figure of Antigone seems almost to occupy a space in between the living and the dead. For, caught between acts of mourning and acts of remembering, Antigone opens up and addresses the fundamental need to grieve for what or who has been lost and to attend to and mark out in some critical way what must be mourned and cared for.

57. Edward Ziter, 'No Grave in the Earth', in *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage*, eds. Erin B. Mee and Helene P. Foley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 297.

58. Nehad Selaiha, 'Antigone in Egypt', in *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage*, eds. Erin B. Mee and Helene P. Foley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 364.

Unburied Bodies: Silence and Mourning as a Mode of Care (Valeriy)

My engagement with the solo performance that would become *Antigone: Post-Mortem* in many ways mobilised Antigone both as a witness to the suffering of war and to a sense of homeland itself. The first time I entered Bucha was in the early weeks of April 2022, shortly after the Ukrainian army re-entered this formally occupied town. At this time, together with the actress, Alina Zievakova, who would go on to perform in this project, I was working with foreign journalists.

However, it was only several months later, while collecting testimonies from survivors in Bucha for archives, that I met the women whose story I would focus on in the making of *Antigone: Post-Mortem*. She was sitting with her back to the ruins of her ancestral home as she explained how in the early days of the occupation of Bucha her husband had been shot in his own garden by a russian soldier who had been looting the house. Her murdered husband had remained lying where he had been shot, unburied for days, while the russians used her house as temporary quarters. The woman had been told to sit in her own basement, which was later turned into a torture chamber. Later, her husband was laid in a shallow grave, and she was able to leave the house. However, after several weeks, following the liberation of the town, her husband's body was then exhumed by the Ukrainian war crimes prosecutors, who subsequently lost his body. It was only located a month later in an overflowing morgue in another town. After the woman had been able to give her husband a proper burial, she found a part of his skull in her garden, where he had been shot in the head. At the very end of my interview with the woman, she brought out a round tin jar for orange-flavoured mints. As she opened it, she explained that this would be the first and last time she would do this and she showed me the contents: two

fragments of her husband's skull, connected by skin tissue. The realisation that part of him had remained in her garden after the burial had deeply disturbed her, for it meant that her husband was still not really at rest. To mourn him, she explained she would place a vase with fresh flowers on the path, marking where his head had been when she found him lying there. She would also never step on that part of the path, explaining that: *Whenever I look at that spot, I see him lying there. I will always see him lying there.*

In my role as listener and translator of testimonies since the commencement of russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I have heard and seen many terrible things in the communities I have visited. Yet, this story of an incomplete or interrupted mourning process has stuck with me the most, and it was this testimony that led me to think about the relationship between acts of witnessing in Ukraine and the figure of Sophocles' Antigone. The powerful impulse of this testimony and the others I collected led me to consider how I might create a performance that foregrounded the interviewing process itself. I was interested in Felman's observations of how Lanzmann's film sought to explore the limits of witnessing and capture that which the witness '*sees* and *hears*, but cannot *understand*'.[59] I was also struck by Felman's description of the responsibility of the witness being experienced as a 'noninterchangable' and 'solitary burden'.[60] This resonated with my experience of working as an interviewer in Bucha and with the responsibility I felt making theatre within a period where, in Harbuzyuk's terms, there is a 'silence index of 0'.[61] It soon became clear to me that listening, responding, and making theatre at such a time came as a great responsibility because by remembering what had occurred in Bucha we were also engaging with moments of delayed grieving and mourning. As such, theatre-making at this time also became a memorializing process, which sought to resist what Sendyka has described as acts of unremembering.[62]

Throughout russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the endless number of cases where bodies have remained unburied due to ongoing military action or occupation has continued to spark my deep indignation. The figure of Antigone has repeatedly sprung up in my imagination, as I reflected on the single-minded quest of the eponymous character of Sophocles' tragedy to bury her brother's body with dignity, despite a prohibition by King Creon. Although from the start I had no intention of staging the whole play, I knew that a dialogue with Sophocles' tragedy and the current situation could provide an important entry point into theatre making at this time. For in Sophocles' play Antigone becomes a witness that confronts the silence of the fearful elders, defying an autocrat with a simple utterance of her testimony. For a person who is captured and chained, the act of testifying is often their only weapon. Political philosopher William James Booth considers the fragile relationship between witnessing, silence, and responsibility, arguing that silences mark out a 'topography' of the past, where the 'hollows or indentations left by the past' await 'memory's voice'.[63] As he goes on to argue, while 'the presence of the past' emerges in various

59. Shoshana Felman, 'The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah', 212.

60. Shoshana Felman, 'Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching', 3.

61. Harbuzuk, 'Overcoming Silence'.

62. Sendyka, 'Non-memory', 3.

63. William James Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness. Identity and Justice* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 74.

'memorial forms' as something very tangible and stable, this 'may conceal from us that the impulse to bear witness is intimately related to fragility' and it is therefore the silent insistence of the past that 'fuels the witness's sense of the need to bring that past before his contemporaries' and to find a voice with which to speak of these past events.[64] In this sense, an individual who speaks of the past contributes to a truth telling process about a historical event, by staging a counter-narrative to resist the forms of cynical, widespread propaganda, which attempts to disavow what has happened.

64. Ibid.

In *Antigone: Post-Mortem*, different processes of witnessing are layered and performed simultaneously. While the text is structured around elements of the testimony of the woman I interviewed in Bucha, I would suggest that the corporeal co-presence of the actress Alina Zievakova, who plays her, also stages a form of witnessing. For in the moment of performance, Alina becomes a secondary witness to the event of the massacre, taking on, through her performance, the role of a mediator on behalf of the survivor and becoming a 'proxy witness',[65] almost like a prosthetic for the person who has lived the trauma.[66] Furthermore, Alina is also someone who has her own war experience, and hence, in this performed encounter her presence embodies the complexity and multi-layered, visceral nature of war. Upon hearing the story and experiencing the performance, the audience then also become witnesses and as such, part of the burden of listening to the story of what happened, is placed on them. It is this process of being in the same space and therefore implicated in some way within the live retelling of an event that makes performance distinct from other media, such as photography.

65. Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ix.

66. Paul Lowe, *Photography, Bearing Witness & the Yugoslav Wars, 1988–2021* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 58.

Structure & Elements of Performance

Most of the artistic choices made during the development of the performance were shaped by real events, drawing either on the text of the interviews or my own observations during months of fieldwork. For example, during the opening monologue, Alina puts on four winter coats and a scarf. She would then take them off one by one at different times throughout the performance. Aside from the possible metaphors of the layers of soil or of memory, this moment references the very concrete conditions of the occupation. For in every occupied area, the russian army would cut off the telecommunication networks, the electricity, and the heating. As it was an exceptionally cold early spring in 2022, people would have to put on every piece of clothing they had at home to keep warm.

The dramaturgical shape of the performance itself then was also designed to reflect the trauma of war. We opted to adopt a non-linear structure, which served to echo the way traumatic events disrupt chronological experience and return to haunt the person who is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In this sense, the events addressed through the performance mimic the fragmentation of the mind of a person with PTSD, where life can be regularly interrupted

through the intrusive traumatic memories and nightmares. This also reflected the way people shared their own traumatic stories, how the process of remembering events and structuring a narrative shatters linear chronology, and, in particular, how the donor of this particular story in Bucha described her nightmares and her ways of coping with the aftermath of the tragedy. The performance also engages with the echoes of trauma by staging several jumps in time and moving between scenes from the occupation, the return to the house, the rebuilding of the yard that I observed on several occasions and the fragments of memories that emerge from different interviews. Indeed, as Slavoj Žizek points out, what makes a narrative of trauma feel truthful 'is its very factual unreliability, its confusion, its inconsistency'.[67] By depicting the unreliability of the traumatic narrative in this way, the performance sought to unsettle and destabilise the audience, making them feel the fragmentary nature of the women's subjective encounter with trauma, so that by trying to make sense of it together, they empathise with her experience further.

67. Slavoj Žizek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 3.

This non-chronological use of structure also problematises the limitations and distortions of language and communicability in relation to the traumatic event, as Paul Lowe indicates in his account of trauma and photography, 'the lacuna of trauma creates a space of silence where the ability of language fails to express experience'.[68] In *Antigone: Post-Mortem*, this idea is explored by incorporating the repetition of the same phrases in three different scenes of a telephone call. This takes place when the woman is trying to find the whereabouts of her husband's body and the use of this repeated phrase, by this time devoid of meaning, transforms the words into a kind of bureaucratic torture: '*Hello! Parcel number: 5,400,731. Yes, I can hold. (Pause). Is there any information about the location of the parcel? Parcel number: 5,400,731*'.[69] In another scene, we include a chorus of recorded testimonies from various perspectives, speaking about different things at the same time, thus making it impossible for the audience to process everything all at once. Later, this chorus is repeated, but now with testimonies from women speaking different languages, which are layered and intermingled together, becoming a mist of sound, in which words dissolve.

68. Paul Lowe, *Photography, Bearing Witness*, 59.

69. Valeriy Simonchuck, *Antigone: Post-Mortem* (unpublished script)

Despite the silence that extreme violence may cause, I suggest, there is also a need to communicate, to find words, and to speak of what has really happened in order to let life continue in the face of the forces of death and destruction. Speaking in such moments sets in motion 'a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and, essentially, of re-externalizing the event'.[70] This idea of finding a narrative to re-externalize the event forms the trajectory of the performance as a whole, which becomes a journey towards an articulation of experience and an acknowledgement of pain.

70. Dori Laub, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 69.

We deliberately kept the set used in the performance relatively sparse as we wanted to foreground the subjective interiority of the act of witnessing. Apart from the bare stage and a chair, we included two LED light panels on tripods, which are the typical attributes of a filmed interview. However, similar lights are also ubiquitous at the sites of murder and at exhumations as they are tools used by forensic

experts. Through the incorporation of these LED lights, we sought to point to the connections between the subjective force of testimony and forms of evidence-collection that seek to fix facts through meticulous procedures, which have a claim to objectivity. This also serves to highlight the contrast between the care one gives to a living human being and the objectification of a dead body, in which a person becomes transformed into *evidence*. We further highlight this binary by including in one of the scenes references to the pattern of gestures, with which a forensic expert examines the head of a dead body, it is a moment that is performed without words, focusing instead only on the physical action of the gestures.

Throughout the piece, Alina also uses the lights on stage, either reluctantly or with purpose, to make events more visible: something is shown more clearly and correlatively while a detail or a wider scene remains in the dark. In this sense, the performance stages a journey, which is similar to the interviewing process, during which trust is built, and the interviewee can resort to and overcome defense mechanisms before deciding to illuminate the important (and difficult) part of the testimony. Moreover, the performance also seeks to stage a form of absence – either an absence of justice, which is suspended and not possible yet, or an absence of peace, or of a body, or a life once lived. And, of course, the performance is primarily about loss.

Therefore, throughout *Antigone-Post-Mortem* we intentionally engage with techniques of omission, where certain facts or elements of the narrative are left untold. Initially, we felt this was needed to avoid any re-traumatisation of the first audiences in Kyiv in 2022. For instance, when trying to find her husband's body, the protagonist refers to it as a 'parcel', adding further to a sense of objectification by using a vocabulary of logistics and business. The piles of coats laid on the stage would at one point allude to dead bodies scattered on the ground. As Alina would pick one coat up, she would cradle it in her arms, as if it were someone's head. In two other scenes, Alina takes out a shard of mirror from a box she carries in her pocket. This was the only hint at the fragment of a skull, a detail of the story we found almost too bizarre and horrific to address directly in any detail, even during the after-show discussions.

I found the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo's reflections on violence and silence useful in this regard. Salcedo describes violent death as 'obscene' and, as such, she says, it exists 'outside representation; it escapes symbolisation altogether'.[71] The possibility of an image no longer being restricted to a specific referent is also explored by Parvati Nair in her discussion of the photographer Sebastião Salgado. Here Nair examines how an image can point to a 'range of contexts, questions and meanings that are at once interlocked and expansive through which the viewer imaginatively travels'.[72] I would argue that such imaginative engagements also become possible in performance through the use of deliberate omission. While being grounded in the facts of a particular situation, building in a moment of omission or silence gives a certain

71. Helen Stoilas, 'Interview with Doris Salcedo', The Art Newspaper, 2 July 2015.

72. Parvati Nair, *A Different Light: The Photography of Sebastião Salgado* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 125.

freedom to the spectators to make their own associations based on their experiences and prior knowledge. The incorporation of omission also becomes a comment on the over-saturation of our everyday lives with mediatised images of war in which the constant barrage of photographs of atrocities leads to a 'diluting effect of the mass media'[73] and processes of desensitisation.[74]

In addition to the spoken and unspoken moments of attestation, we also incorporate sound in the performance as a mode of witnessing in its own right. Most of the soundscapes used in the performance were recorded during my field trips to Bucha and other places in the Kyiv region. This very particular sonic topography expands scenic reality by generating within the audience three-dimensional 'pictures' of particular places, while providing minimum visual stimuli. After one of the performances, one audience member described how it made him feel 'as if he was there'. Sound was also used to disrupt the narrative through forms of juxtaposition. In one of the scenes, the performer stages an excursion through a destroyed house. This is performed while being accompanied by a soundscape of a street with children playing and cars passing. This moment was based on the actual tours that local people would give us, walking us through their homes where the roof or a wall was missing and where, as a consequence, the boundary of private and public being was erased. As Claudette Lauzon has argued, home can be understood as a stand-in for the body,[75] as such, the violent destruction of a home has an existential quality to it, revealing a palpable sense of personal pain.

In the final section of the performance, the sound montage is of a more constructed nature. First the sound of rain appears, which was recorded in Bucha in early June 2022 during the first thunderstorm following the commencement of the full-scale war. Then this sound slowly merges with the sound of falling metal. This was derived from an image the bereaved woman shared with me. When russian forces entered Bucha on tanks and armoured vehicles, they were attacked by Ukrainian drones, and the metal debris would fall on her house (about 100 metres away from the explosion). It was drumming on her roof, she explained, *'as if it was hail'*. With this sound of metal hail growing in volume, Alina, who by this time has taken all the coats off and is wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, lifts her head up and looks at the sky, facing these thunderous sounds without a hint of fear. Therefore, in this moment, the combination of these sounds and Alina's actions become a way of creating an image of resilience when faced with a violent situation that engulfs normal reality.

I would therefore also suggest that this use of sound served to expand the scope of the performance. In one of the scenes, for example, we use a layering of voices, and the audience hears different women's voices from various conflict zones around the world, speaking in eight different languages.[76] For us, this became a bridge between the different conflicts that have taken place all over the globe. It is a moment that attempts to connect different perspectives with very particular contexts, bringing together different groups of women through the myth of Antigone and foregrounding the eternal figure of a woman, who is prevented

73. James Nachtwey, quoted in Greg Fallis, Sunday Salon: James Nachtwey, 25 February 2007, https://salon.utata.org/2007/02/25/james-nachtwey/ (accessed 29 May 2025).

74. See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003); and Judith *Butler*, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

75. Claudette Lauzon, *The Unmaking of Home in Contemporary Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

76. These voices were taken from testimonies of women that either lived through conflict or whose relatives 'were disappeared', and who come from Argentina, Myanmar, Rwanda, Bosnia, Palestine, Israel, Armenia, and Darfur.

from laying her loved one to rest, but who will not back down in pursuit of this need and this right.

Reactions

As was expected, the reactions we received to the performances of this piece in Ukraine were very different to those we received when the performance was shown abroad. The three performances in Kyiv took place on 24 December 2022. The atmosphere was tense, as all the people knew what the performance would be about and had some form of personal lived experience of the war they could draw from. Because of that, they were able to 'read' and interpret what most of the scenes were about. Unfortunately, there were no published reviews of the play. However, the Kyiv-based theatre critic Serhiy Vinnichenko was in the audience and took part in one of the after-show discussions. He noted how *Antigone:Post-Mortem* neither sought to articulate a direct connection with the Sophocles' play, nor did it document the realities of war in a factual manner. Instead, he suggested, the power of the play was that it fell into 'a category of its own' for it explored the lived experience of war by using Antigone as a 'powerful archetypal image' and used this to connect with testimonial material. Vinnichenko also noted the importance of addressing the future, making the point that the 'impossibility to perform funerary rights will persist for a long time'.[77] At another one of the after-show discussions an audience member commented that she believed that the piece 'addressed a highly sensitive topic in a caring manner', and that she was confronted with neither manipulation of her emotions, nor shock tactics. Due to the fact that life in Ukraine has for a long time (since 2014) been one shaped by war, people had very particular associations to certain images. For example, when talking about the shard of mirror that Alina takes out on two occasions, one woman recounted a situation that happened to her father in Donetsk in 2014. Shortly after he left the house, there was an explosion nearby. When he came back, he found a fragment of a shell stuck in the wall of his room. He kept it as a memento of how close he was to losing his life. Another woman said that the performance made her think about how she does not know what happens in the life of the person next to her, what kind of challenges they may be going through – addressing, in other words, the heterogeneity of war experiences in Ukraine.

77. Serhiy Vinnichenko 'Post-Show Discussion', *Antigone: Post-Mortem*, December 24, 2022.

Various audience members claimed that the aesthetic of the performance reminded them of the Second World War: the coats Alina puts on, her boots, the stark lighting that had a feel of a black and white photograph. The thematic parallels with the historical challenge and trauma our ancestors had to go through, added to the bitter realisation of history repeating itself before our eyes. The photographic aesthetic and the cinematic quality of the montage with the lights creating impressions of close-ups and wide angles reportedly gave some audience members a sense of distancing, as if it all was behind the screen, lacking

colour, set in a distant time, not happening to us here and now. This, they said, made it more bearable, creating a way for people to approach the topic in a safer way.

When we presented the performance beyond the borders of Ukraine, there was a general need for contextualisation. People would have different levels of knowledge about the war. For this purpose, we decided to introduce the performance at a festival in Italy in 2023 by giving out leaflets that had both the information about the process of making the piece and the context of the occupation of Bucha. The performance was in English, but most of the people did not speak the language well. One senior couple, who spoke with me and Alina after the performance, said they could understand most things because they could empathise without needing to understand the language. Most of the feedback we received in Italy tended in fact to address the aesthetics of the piece, rather than its content. In London, a woman said that the lights made her travel to different places (and times) and enter different states. Someone else said that he wanted to know more about the woman's life and her experiences. The latter was something never mentioned in Ukraine, I think, because people could construct what was left unsaid through the combination of their own experiences and the many media stories they consumed.

Final Reflections: The Ritual

The fact that russia's full-scale war against Ukraine continued beyond the 2022 Bucha massacre (and at the time of writing has been going on for nearly four years now) is probably at the core of *Antigone: Post-Mortem* and was the very reason that the connection with the Sophocles' play emerged. The image of a dead body lying on the street unburied for me represents what I and everyone around me feel every day; the war continues. It is like being in a limbo, a purgatory-like space, in a state of suspension – not knowing when the air strikes will cease, when the people will stop dying, when the war will end. Similarly, it resembles a suspension of life during a prolonged grief or in a situation when a relative or their remains are missing. Presenting us repeatedly with the time between death and the ritual to commemorate it.

At the same time, I feel strongly that the performance is also a tribute to stories of recovery, which goes hand-in-hand with mourning. Through showing this sense of agency, we try to balance out the narratives of victimhood and trauma. For example, there is a scene where the protagonist talks of work as becoming a 'form of therapy' for her. This was a coping mechanism that was reported by many of the people I interviewed, where rebuilding, helping others where possible, and being in constant motion became a way of overcoming the inertia and trauma of suffering and loss. Throughout the performance we incorporate a movement from darkness to light, which we hope reflects a transition from testimony to hope and a means of getting rid of the weight of the past. Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar describes the key role light

plays in his work both literally and metaphorically, saying: 'It's true that it's in a very dark setting. I always wonder how much light I should let through: it's a key element in the program. It's something objective, an element of hope'.[78] This sentiment resonates with my own reflections on *Antigone: Post-Mortem*, particularly in relation to one specific moment in the performance, near the end. Here, Alina begins carefully folding several coats and a scarf, which are lying in a pile on the floor. As she folds, she arranges them into a line and then, taking in each small, folded piece of clothing, she follows the line with her eyes, extending her gaze into the distance, following an imaginary line of similar coats as far as her eyes can see. For me, this a gesture of mourning, but also of care, reminding us, to echo Connerton, that caring and attending to the dead is itself part of the process of mourning those who are no longer with us. As such, while the performance is arguably about acts of remembering and witnessing, it is also about processes of mourning as a form of care. It is about the precision of everyday rituals that honour the memory of a person and about paying respect to a loved one's remains, even if it requires weeks, months, or years of searching. Yet it is also about the quiet attention of love. This is something that emerged for me time and again when interviewing people who had lost loved ones in Bucha, and it points to rituals and processes which stand in radical opposition to the dehumanisation of war. Hence, it is also the reason for Alina to perform this ritual of folding, remembering, and caring – it is a moment in the performance that attends both to those that are already resting underground and those that are not yet at peace.

78. Alfredo Jaar, 'Alfredo Jaar. Conversation in Chile 2005', quoted in Alfredo Jaar and Adriana Valdés, *Jaar SCL 2006* (New York: Actar Publishing, 2006), 86.

Conclusion (Amanda and Valeriy)

Antigone: Post-Mortem was not created to be an adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigon*e. Yet in many ways, it is through its re-imagining of the figure of Antigone that the performance is able to simultaneously address the process of interrupted mourning while staging acts of resistance. In his discussion of Sophocles' play, the writer Hanif Kureishi describes the figure of Antigone as a 'rebel and refusenik' who is a 'difficult and insistent woman'.[79] Arguing that the '"anti" in the name Antigone should be emphasised', Kureishi points out that she 'never wavers' and is 'absolutely clear [. . .] She will have the rituals of mourning'.[80] The moments of *Antigone: Post-Mortem*, when Alina – as the bereaved woman/Antigone – repeatedly demands the return of the body of her husband ('*parcel #5400731'*), whose death, she says, was '*abrupt and violent'*, also stages an act of resistance to the dehumanising conditions wrought on her community by the russian invasion. In this moment, she refuses the role of a silenced victim and instead speaks out, insisting on the return of her husband's body and her right to be able to give him a proper burial.

In this sense, the incorporation of the figure of Antigone in *Antigone: Post-Mortem* does not suggest that Sophocles' play contains one universal meaning. Rather when the figure of Antigone emerges in

79. Hanif Kureishi, 'Foreword' to *Antigone* by Slavoj Žižek (London: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2026), viii.

80. Ibid.

Ukraine, she is reimagined and 'appropriated in response to [the] specific historical, cultural, and artistic needs' [81] of a country struggling against russia's full-scale invasion. When the Antigone speaks in *Antigone: Post-Mortem*, she stages a form of palimpsest, addressing the audience as a bereaved wife in Bucha, as Sophocles' rebellious heroine, but also as other bereaved women in war, who have also been prohibited from burying loved ones. This staging of a palimpsest becomes highly affecting in the context of war because it offers a way of exposing multiple layers of meaning and addressing the conjunction of different temporalities.

Writing about performances that took place in the ruins of the besieged Sarajevo during the Balkans war, Silvija Jestrović draws on the concept of 'spoilation' to examine the potency of palimpsestic performative interventions that were staged 'on top of ruins, or within semi-destroyed cultural institutions' within the devasted city.[82] These performances, she argues, function 'as a reconstruction ritual that not only [preserved] the memory of a historical building, but [kept] the ruins live'.[83] Such practices she goes on to argue, became 'palimpsest-making processes', which embody 'the layers of the city that has been *skinned* through violence and terror'.[84] In *Antigone: Post-Mortem*, the staging of the palimpsestic process emerges somewhat differently. Here, the layering that takes place attends to an interweaving of the memory of the past violence at Bucha with a concept of remembering and of futurity, captured through the accounts of disrupted processes of mourning. Through the figure of Antigone/the bereaved woman, the performance bears witness to how the woman's home has taken on a palimpsest quality and has become both a place of homeliness, continuity, and love but is also now a site of violence and loss. Through her demands for the return of '*parcel #5400731*', the bereaved wife/Antigone insists on a care for the dead, while also simultaneously addressing a future and demanding justice for the crimes of the past. As such, the performance contributes to processes that remember the violence of the war, drawing attention to the importance of acts of witness at this time. The drive to bear witness is born of an impulse that is recognisable to many Ukrainians and is reflected on poignantly by the Ukrainian writer Bohdana Matiyash:

> We're talking about the war [.] We are telling ourselves and then the world about the crimes the Russians have perpetrated in our land with that faith that someday this long list will be reviewed in the Hague. We talk to refute, to strike out the narratives of Russian propaganda; we talk so that we and the world can know the truth about us in this war. It might seem unnecessary to emphasize the need to know the truth about ourselves. Yet this is indeed important in the Ukrainian context where the traumas of the twentieth century were mostly silenced — because of fear, because of the government's total duplicity and conscious concealment and denial of its crimes, and, therefore, because of the sheer lack of information about them.[85]

81. Erin B. Mee and Helene P. Foley, 'Mobilizing Antigone', in *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage*, eds. E. B. Mee and H. P. Foley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4–5.

82. Silvija Jestrovic, *Performance, Space, Utopia: Cities of war, cities of exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 154.

83. Ibid., 154.

84. Ibid.,

85. Bohdana Matiyash 'Bearing Witness to the War', *Krytyka*, Oct Daty 2013, https://krytyka.com/en/articles/bearing-witness-to-the-war (accessed June 9, 2025).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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