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EDITORIAL

Theatre's Response to the Russian War on Ukraine: Performances of Witnessing, Documentation, and Intervention

We are writing this editorial in the summer of 2025, three and a half years after russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. In recent weeks, russian forces have increased their bombardment of Київ [Kyiv], Харків [Kharkiv], and a number of other cities. While various political leaders across the globe continue to speak about a possible end point to hostilities, the largest and deadliest war in Europe since the Second World War continues unabated. The number of casualties on both sides is immense. In June 2025, russia recorded nearly one million military casualties and approximately 250,000 deaths. At the same time, Ukrainian military casualties were reported as being approximately 400,000, with 150,000 dead. In addition, thousands of Ukrainian civilians have lost their lives, with recent reports indicating that between 2022 and 2024 over 35,000 Ukrainian civilians had been injured and 13,883 killed.[1] The violence of this war has particularly impacted on younger generations. Many young people have lost parents or other family members in the conflict. Furthermore, thousands of Ukrainian children have been abducted and are missing 'thought to be held in russia or russian-occupied territories',[2] where they have been subjected to various forms of 're-education'. According to reports by the UN, since 2022, at least 35,000 Ukrainian children have been kidnapped and taken into russian territory, where they have been 'forbidden to speak and learn the Ukrainian language or preserve their Ukrainian identity'.[3] Many hundreds of other children have also been internally displaced or become refugees. UN

1. Statistica Research Department, August 14, 2025, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293492/ukraine-war-casualties/ (accessed August 30, 2025).
2. Ruchi Kumar, '"Basically Impossible to Get Them Back": Russa's Mass Abduction of Ukrainian Children is a War Crime, Say Experts', *The*

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reports indicate that as of December 2024 'an estimated 737,000 children had been internally displaced' and a further '1.7 million were refugees, many of them separated from a parent, usually a -father'.[4] As these reports make clear, the actual numbers of kidnapped children and those who have lost their lives or been injured are likely to be considerably higher.

One of the fatalities of the war was the Ukrainian novelist, poet, and war crimes researcher, Victoria Amelina, who in 2023 was writing a book about her experience of living through russia's war against Ukraine and the need to document the atrocities committed as part of this act of aggression to secure justice in the future. As she explains in her book: 'The quest for justice has turned me from a novelist and mother into a war crimes researcher. Over the last year, I have photographed shell holes in library walls and the ruins of schools and cultural centres; I have recorded the testimonies of survivors and eyewitnesses of atrocities. I've done this to uncover the truth. To ensure the survival of memory and to give justice and lasting peace a chance'.[5] Amelina lost her life in 2023 aged just 37. She died when the pizza restaurant she was eating at in the east of Ukraine was struck by a russian missile. Her book, edited by friends and published posthumously in 2025, poignantly highlights the importance of community and friendship at a time of conflict, emphasising the vital need for acts of truth-telling that can document the violence wrought by russian forces against the people of Ukraine. Amelina's focus on the necessity to speak out, to bear witness, and enact forms of truth-telling in response to the violence of war, resonates with many of the discussions explored in this special issue.

Many of the contributors to this special issue – and to the accompanying digital Interventions section of CTR – reflect in their essays and other critical or creative writings on how they, and the performance works they engage with, seek to witness, remember, and attest to the injustices of the ongoing conflict. Drawing on works from different geographical contexts and exploring a wide range of performance practices, the authors consider how theatre and performance is responding to the suffering of Ukrainian civilians, both within the borders of Ukraine and beyond, where many Ukrainians now live as refugees. At the same time, the special issue also reflects the need to reconfigure local, national, and global relationships in order to respond to russia's centuries-long colonial efforts against the Ukrainian people, their identity, culture, and language. This colonial project has been responsible for perceptions of Ukrainianness across the West and has largely also rendered Ukraine as irrelevant within global and Western hegemonic processes, effectively invisiblising Ukraine's history and culture in these contexts. These processes of invisibilising and marginalisation have also been enacted against multiple other countries that fall under what the political geographer Martin Müller has described as the 'Global Easts', a category he adopts to describe 'an epistemic space' that becomes a site of liminality 'in between North and South'.[6] Müller uses this term to describe how since the fall of the Soviet Union, Global East countries have been absent in conceptions of globality, firstly by

Guardian, June 27, 2025.

3. United Nations Press Release, 'Deportation, Treatment of Ukraine's Children by Russian Federation Take Centre Stage by Many Delegates at Security Council Briefing', *United Nations*, August 24, 2023, https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15395.doc.htm (accessed September 4, 2025).
4. United Nations Press Release, 'UN Report Details of Devastating Impact of Hostilities on Children in Ukraine', *United Nations*, https://ukraine.un.org/en/291365-un-report-details-devastating-impact-hostilities-children-ukraine (accessed September 4, 2025).
5. Victoria Amelina, *Looking at Woman, Looking at War: A War and Justice Diary* (London: William Collins, 2025), 1.
6. Martin Müller, 'In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South', *Geopolitics* 25, no. 3 (2020): 734–755 (735).

being excluded from notions of the Global North (as they were not privileged enough) and, secondly, because they were considered to be too privileged to be included in conceptions of the Global South.[7]

This process of the invisibilisation of Ukraine was then highlighted in the West following the full-scale invasion, when there finally was Global recognition of the country's status as a sovereign country under attack. This then led to acts of global cultural repatriation and the reattribution of Ukrainian cultural heritage efforts as well as discussions about the need to decolonise Slavic Studies departments.[8] These decolonial efforts led to long- and short-term projects engaging with Ukrainian theatres, such as The Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings initiative, launched by John Freedman in 2022 and the Ukrainian Drama Translations project, initiated in 2022 by Dmytro Ternovyu. As the late Ukrainian theatre historian and critic Maiia Harbuziuk notes, in Ukraine the war shifted epistemic and cultural paradigms, demanding a decolonial perspective and reinforcing Ukraine's belonging within broader European spaces.[9] These ideas inform many of the contributions in this special issue, where authors debate how theatre in Ukraine and abroad interrogates the place of Ukraine and Ukrainian-ness within wider global, socio-political, and cultural spaces.

The question of claiming a space and place for Ukraine – both in terms of actual borders and in terms of forms of political and cultural belonging – connects theatre making with a space in which witnessing can happen. While the violence of the full-scale invasion constantly interrupts, disrupts, and reshapes artistic practices in Ukraine, artists doggedly continue with their work. In so doing, they seek new ways of speaking out and addressing the ethical and political debates evoked by this aggression, questioning how the relationship between art and life can be reconfigured at a time of ongoing conflict.

The debates the authors in this special issue develop about the role of theatre at a time of invasion, open up new ways of interrogating what Natalie Álvarez describes as the 'unsettling kinship' between theatre and war.[10] After all, as Álvarez points out, while 'the tools of theatre are used in the waging of war', so too are 'the tools of waging war [. . .] used in the making of performance'.[11] It is also clear that in Ukraine, after 2014 and, again from 2022 onwards, theatre and war have become even more closely related. Some artists argue that theatre and performance should become a means of advocating for military support and have used the arts to collect money for the army, for example. Other artists – such as Magda Szpecht – have sought to position theatre as a cultural battlefield. In such contexts, theatre is co-opted to directly engage with the ongoing matters of war. In Szpecht's *Spy Girls* (2024, Narva, Estonia), for example, as discussed by Anneli Saro, Natalia Skorokhod, and Katarina Tomps, in this special issue, performers work with Estonian and Ukrainian secret services to access russian

7. Ibid.

8. Ewa Thompson, 'The Field Isn't "Slavic Studies" at all – It Should be called "Russian Propaganda Studies" – A Few Exceptions Only Confirm the Rule', interview by Oleksandr Pankieiev, *Forum For Ukrainian Studies*, December 21, 2023, https://ukrainian-studies.ca/2023/12/21/interview-with-ewa-thompson-the-field-isnt-slavic-studies-at-all-it-should-be-called-russian-propaganda-studies-a-few-exceptions-only-co/ (accessed September 4, 2025).

9. Maiia Harbuziuk, 'Theatre as a Humanitarian Mission: Ukraine's Experience 2022', *Critical Stages*, no. 25 (2022), https://www.critical-stages.org/25/theatre-as-a-%CE%B7umanitarian-mission-ukraines-experience-2022/ (accessed September 4, 2025).

10. Natalie Álvarez, *Theatre & War* (London: Methuen Drama, 2023), xvi.

11. Ibid.

army's data and in *Będzie trzeba, to pójdę na wojnę* (*She stands in the middle of the battlefield*) (2025, Warszawa/Warsaw, Poland), which was developed collaboration with Amsterdam-based Szymon Adamczak, Szpecht creates a performance that addresses the experiences of many women theatre artists who chose to join the Ukrainian army.

There are, however, many different perspectives on how closely theatre and the arts should involve themselves in the events of the war. The Ukrainian music quartet DakhaBrakha's call to arm Ukraine at the 2023 SPRING Festival in Utrecht, for example, prompted heated debates in the Netherlands about the role and responsibility of theatre during military conflicts.[12] This complex relationship between theatre and war is also further complicated at a time when theatre is being put to work as a form of truth-telling and a means of documenting potential war crimes for future justice processes. In this context, theatre arguably becomes aligned with juridical processes while also contributing to processes of resilience and survival, providing forms of physical and psychological shelter and enacting modes of resistance in the face of ongoing aggression, denials, and other forms of propagandist rhetoric.

In her account of Ukrainian theatre's response in the months following the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian theatre critic and scholar, Hanna Veselovska, describes how theatre buildings across Ukraine provided forms of refuge for frightened civilians. Many theatre venues in Ukraine at this time, she explains, were 'refashioned as settings where human pain and suffering [were] concentrated' and a great effort was 'made to ease the pain of civilians'.[13] At the same time, the distinctions between the role of the artist and the work of the soldier became blurred, as 'actors, directors and theatre technicians joined the territorial defence or the Armed Forces of Ukraine'.[14] Yet it was soon devastatingly clear that theatres were not safe spaces and would not be spared from the violence of russia's invasion. As Veselovska explains, many theatres came under attack from russian forces, with some 'falling under occupation', such as the theatre in Херсон [Kherson], and others coming 'under seige', as in the case in Чернігів [Chernihiv].[15] The failure of theatre to be able to offer sanctuary or shelter was horrifically laid bare on 16 March 2022, when the Маріуполь [Mariupol] theatre was bombed by russian forces. The attack came despite 'widespread knowledge that it was the biggest civilian shelter in the city',[16] which was protecting almost 1000 people, many of them children. In 2024, a group of actors and other practitioners from Mariupol theatre responded to these events by creating a small touring performance that reflected on their experiences of taking refuge in the theatre and the violence that followed. This led Mariupol's new director, Hennadiy Dybovskiy, to speak of the

12. Sruti Bala, 'Moeten kunstenaars niet de scheidslijnen opheffen tussen vriend en vijand?' *Theaterkrant*, May 25, 2023, https://www.theaterkrant.nl/nieuws/sruti-bala-moeten-kunstenaars-niet-de-scheidslijnen-opheffen-tussen-vriend-en-vijand; Ira Melkonyan, 'Oorlogsgeweld laat geen ruimte over voor zachte pasteltinten', *Theaterkrant*, July 6, 2023, https://www.theaterkrant.nl/nieuws/ira-melkonyan-oorlogsgeweld-laat-geen-ruimte-over-voor-zachte-pasteltinten/; and Grzegorz Reske, 'Ik zal geen enkele kunstenaar op SPRING censureren', *Theaterkrant*, July 18, 2023, https://www.theaterkrant.nl/nieuws/directeur-grzegorz-reske-ik-zal-geen-enkele-kunstenaar-op-spring-censureren/ (all accessed September 4, 2025).

13. 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 July 23, 2025).

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Shaun Walker, '"Our Destroyed Theatre's Heart Still Beats": Mariupol's Actors Return to the Stage, Two Years on', *The Guardian*, March 16, 2004, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/16/our-destroyed-theatres-heart-still-beats-mariupols-actors-return-to-the-stage-two-years-on.

resilience of theatre, declaring that while 'the body of our theatre has been destroyed [...] the heart still beats'.[17]

These scenes of aggression, suffering, and resilience highlight the way that the war continues to shape theatre's capacity to contribute to processes of documenting, memorialising, and speaking about the events of the war. Writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, in an essay entitled 'Understanding and Politics', Hannah Arendt reflects on what distinguishes processes of speaking from acts of violence. While 'weapons and fighting belong in the realm of violence', she argues, 'violence, as distinguished from power, is mute', for 'violence begins where speech ends'.[18] Yet, while speech is certainly silenced by the moment of violence, in its aftermath, as the authors in this special issue reveal, forms of theatre continue to emerge, finding new ways of engaging in truth-telling, while navigating the impact of crimes that have gone unpunished and acts of violence that remain unremembered.

In this sense, russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine injected an acute political urgency into theatre making in Ukraine, initiating new practices that open up a space where trauma is embodied and silenced testimonies are brought to light as a means of challenging the official narratives of statistical death tolls. By sharing personal survival stories and reconstructing events that russian propaganda seeks to distort or erase, Ukrainian theatre becomes a powerful counter-archive for preserving memory in a living form when digital records are susceptible to manipulation.

This has led Ukrainian theatre makers to adopt new approaches to verbatim performance, using survivor testimonies, war diaries, and interviews to explore the gaps between the sayable and unsayable, the facts, and how these have been experienced. Through its focus on the real, these forms of theatre making resist the erasure of atrocity and complicate the lived experiences of war, revealing how the truth can still be remembered and communicated, even when the struggle for meaning continues both on the battlefield and in other mediatised accounts of the conflict.

One such example is *The Reckoning* by Dash Art, a play based on the work of *The Reckoning Project: Ukraine Testifies*, a prominent initiative established in March 2022, which is dedicated to documenting and legally validating testimonies of war crimes and human rights violations resulting from russia's invasion of Ukraine.[19] When developing *The Reckoning*, co-writers Anastacia Kosidii and Josephine Burton drew on verified survivor testimonies, using these to expose the brutality of russian war crimes and to call out those who seek to disavow this. The play premiered at London's Arcola Theatre and exemplifies the transformation of war testimony into a form of documentary theatre that is performed by two Ukrainian actors (Olga Safronova and Simeon Kyslyi) in Ukrainian but with simultaneous translation. *The Reckoning* then becomes more than a performance; it presents an act of attestation, staging an ethical act of witnessing and a powerful form of resistance. Through its transformation of war testimonies into immersive theatre

17. Hennadiy Dybovskiy quoted in Shaun Walker, '"Our Destroyed Theatre's Heart Still Beats": Mariupol's actors return to the stage, two years on', *The Guardian*, March 16, 2004, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/16/our-destroyed-theatres-heart-still-beats-mariupols-actors-return-to-the-stage-two-years-on.

18. Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 308.

19. The Reckoning Project, 'The Reckoning Project', https://www.thereckoningproject.com/ (accessed September 1, 2025).

the play urges audiences to engage emotionally with the realities of war and to consider the human dimensions of justice.

In the context of war, theatre stages forms of cultural resistance as exemplified in the work of niezależny teatr GAS (незалежний театр GAS) [the independent theatre GAS] in Poland, which has become a vital platform for displaced Ukrainian artists and their stories. GAS not only offers a physical and institutional space for performance work by refugees, it also amplifies Ukrainian voices, especially those of young people, ensuring that their artistic testimonies are not confined by the borders of war. This cross-border collaboration demonstrates how theatre can resist erasure by building networks of solidarity. By supporting Ukrainian artists in exile and presenting their work in Ukrainian, Polish, and English in Poland, GAS complicates the idea of hospitality, reinforcing theatre's role as both sanctuary and weapon of cultural defiance. Performances of resistance also emerge in the work of other Ukrainian diasporic artists who contribute to Ukrainian cultural resistance by amplifying silenced voices and transforming lived experience into aesthetic and civic acts. Andrew Kushnir's documentary theatre practice in Canada is a good example of this. Kushnir adopts a diasporic perspective and channels testimony and memory into Canadian theatre spaces, resisting the numbness that is caused from daily news about the violence in Ukraine. Collectively, these practices reveal how theatre and performance support cultural sovereignty while outside the borders of Ukraine. In these types of practice, theatre offers a form of resistance to the enemy's domination, not with weapons but with presence, testimony, and imagination. In this way, Ukrainian theatre actively aligns itself with broader processes of memory, justice, and survival, maintaining the visibility of Ukrainian voices in global cultural and academic discourses and countering both silence and appropriation.

Forms of theatre that seek to engage with acts of truth-telling are also shaped by ethical and political imperatives that must be carefully navigated. As editors of this special issue, these imperatives have also informed our writing, thinking, and editorial processes. At a time of ongoing war, the process of writing and editing becomes a critical act of witnessing underpinned by demands of allyship and solidarity. Our strategy in response has been to develop an editorial reflexivity. We have, for example, actively encouraged contributions from Ukrainian scholars, researchers, and theatre makers, placing these alongside works by non-Ukrainian authors that foreground the Ukrainian lived experience of the war. We have also ensured that at least one Ukrainian expert has been involved in the peer-review process of each contribution. In the curation of the accompanying Interventions section of this special issue, we have also been able to include contributions that are more performative or which use different formats of presentation to the more formal texts in the main body of the journal.

Here, Ukrainian playwright Vitaliy Chenskiy reflects on the current 'how should one write about war' debate, which has become a highly politicised question in Ukraine. As russia's full-scale invasion deepened, he argues, the Ukrainian state's efforts to shape its own narrative also

intensified, producing a complex dual reality, where a vital defence of national unity amidst existential threats emerged alongside a growing concern about the narrowing of media freedom and civic space. Kremlin-aligned media has effectively manipulated this ambiguity, framing Ukraine's wartime information regulations not as legitimate defence, but as authoritarian overreach, thereby drawing a false equivalence with russia's own draconian suppression of dissent. In this sense, Ukraine is engaged in an ongoing and complex battle where it is having to fight a powerful aggressor on many fronts. What is remembered or forgotten at such a time, and who gets to decide, all play crucial roles in shaping a sense of Ukrainian national identity. Those conflicting tendencies of reclaiming and coming to terms with the past generate considerable tensions in all parts of Ukrainian social and cultural life. The question of what it means to perform a patriotic version of Ukrainian-ism must be debated and explored, otherwise there is the risk of falling into forms of self-censorship that are motivated by a desire to uphold personal integrity as well as the narratives associated with Ukraine's complex history.

While we have examined these complex questions of identity in our role as editors, we have also considered how our own different positionalities shape the editorial process. As a trio, we represent different and specifically situated perspectives, underpinned by our locations and languages within Ukrainian, Polish, Dutch, and UK contexts. While our editorial approach has in part been shaped by these contexts, we have also listened closely to our contributors, reading between the lines of the texts that have been submitted, establishing conversations and tuning into the different forms of struggle and resistance these authors are engaged with. As a result, and following the lead of many Ukrainian theatre makers, commentators, and writers, in this editorial, we have chosen to use our privilege to demonstrate solidarity with those who are fighting for Ukraine's independence and have taken the decision to lowercase 'russia' and other associated words. This approach has also been adopted by some, but not all of the authors who have contributed to this special issue and we have respected and preserved these differences and the different perspectives they represent. The rhetorical strategy of lowercasing appears in both Ukrainian and russian languages where it is adopted to perform the positionality of the writer, inscribing a form of resistance into the act of writing itself. It is a discursive strategy that has recently received support from Ukraine's National Commission for State Language Standards in 2023, when it ruled that it would allow 'the lowercase spelling of "Russia", "Moscow", and related words in unofficial texts'.[20] Our decision to adopt these rhetorical strategies of resistance then have been one way that we have sought to draw attention to the power and politics of language itself.

This notion of the power of language has also been a central thematic within russia's invasion, not least because of the centuries-long linguistic russification processes that have taken place in Ukraine. In fact, it was the bilingualism of Ukrainian society that was co-opted by vladimir putin as part of his justification for the invasion, leading him to argue that he was simply 'protecting' a russian-speaking population. The claims by

20. Maria Tril, 'Ukraine Allows Lowercase "Russia" in Informal Writing', *Euromaidan Press*, September 22, 2023, https://euromaidanpress.com/2023/09/22/ukraine-allows-lowercase-russia-in-informal-writing (accessed August 15, 2025).

putin that the Ukrainian language is a dialect of russian and the russification of abducted children and other Ukrainian-speaking people in russian occupied areas of Ukraine also reveal how language and what is spoken where and by whom has become a key element of the ongoing war. While scholars have argued that speaking russian does not necessarily denote russian ethnicity and identity,[21] there is an increased push from the Ukrainian government and its institutions to decolonise Ukrainian public spaces and reinforce the symbolic power of Ukrainian language as the state language. As a consequence, the issue of language and the use of russian in schools and at home has become a contentious issue for many Ukrainian families, teachers, and young people in Ukraine and beyond. Many Ukrainian people have therefore chosen to stop using russian as their language, even if this is their first language, or the language of their family. Other Ukrainians have argued that entirely eradicating the russian language, or refusing to acknowledge russian artefacts, artists, or musicians, ultimately has a detrimental on the cultural life of Ukraine itself, disavowing the complex and rich history of the country. For example, in December 2022, the Ukrainian parliament passed Bill 7633 in its first reading, a measure intended to significantly reduce the use of russian sources in education and research. The draft legislation provoked criticism and sparked extensive debate in both journalistic commentary and parliamentary discussion. This poses a significant threat to the integrity of academic research, especially when language, as a symbol of national identity, is caught between protectionism and liberalism.[22]

While language clearly has a political dimension within russia's war against Ukraine, playing an important role Ukrainian cultural resistance, it is important to recognise that language is not simply a linguistic system of words and grammar but has a broader semiotic, emotional, and embodied dimension. We are therefore excited to be able to include elements of multimedia alongside the articles in this issue and encourage readers to visit the Interventions section of this special issue, which can be found on the Contemporary Theatre Review website. The contributions in Interventions have an emphasis on praxis, enabling the authors to draw on different languages of expression and to frame forms of cultural expression through performativity. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor has argued that embodied acts, gestures, and artistic expressions function as forms of repertoire, becoming vehicles of cultural knowledge that transcend textual or linguistic transmission.[23] Performance becomes an important way of exploring not just acts of speaking out and of documenting 'what has happened' but also produces embodied memories that are conveyed through movement, orality, dance, song, and other performative gestures. In this context, we would argue that Ukrainian theatre resists being reduced to 'language' in a narrow sense. As the performances explored in the Interventions section demonstrate, Ukrainian songs, the presence of bodies within a shelter, and the symbolic act of cooking food on stage all become

21. Ammon Cheskin and Angela Kachuyevski, 'The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Post-Soviet Space: Language, Politics and Identity', *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 1 (2018): 1–23. https://kyivindependent.com/explainer-why-do-some-ukrainians-speak-russian/

22. Tetyana Lunyova, Ursula Lanvers, and Oksana Zelik. 'Bill 7633 on the Restriction of the Use of Russian Text Sources in Ukrainian Research and Education: Analysing Language Policy in Times of War'. *Language Policy* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-024-09697-4.

23. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

a means of staging and embodying not only resistance but forms of survival and resilience.

While the socio-historical and cultural context of Ukraine is one shaped around a complex relationship with different languages, the texts produced for publication in this special issue have all had to navigate and engage with the language of the journal – English. The majority of authors included in this special issue are not writing in their home language; furthermore, in many instances, authors are navigating productions that were performed in a language that is neither their home language nor the language of the journal. These multi-linguistic dissonances have become the textual underpinning of this special issue. We are painfully aware that the status of English as a global language and its claims to be the universal language of knowledge are unjust and inherently connected with its colonial history,[24] and we have therefore thought carefully about how to present the different linguistic frameworks shaping this special issue in ways that values the plurality of voices and reflects the inclusivity of the journal. We did not want to create an editorial context in which one's ability to write in 'academic' English ultimately determined which voice would be included and, therefore, what sort of content would inform the shaping of this special issue.

24. See David Crystal, *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

We have not found a 'perfect' or 'magical' solution to address these issues and concerns. However, in order to emphasise the presence of multiple languages, we worked with peer reviewers who could support both the knowledge production and communication of these ideas but who speak several, relevant languages. We also took the decision to foreground the different linguistic realities of the performances discussed by asking authors to ensure that the first time they reference a specific play, book, city, or theatre they do so using the relevant home language, incorporating any usage of Cyrillic text as appropriate and placing the English translation in square brackets. For the romanisation of Cyrillic, we followed official resources provided by the Ukrainian government;[25] however, sometimes the romanisation of names differed depending on the country in which the artist worked. For example, the name of Ukrainian theatre artist Олена Апчел is romanised as Olena Apchel in English-speaking countries and as Olena Apczel in Poland. Yet she works in both contexts. In such cases, we tried to standardise the spelling, often adopting the English-language version in light of the journal's own linguistic context.

25. https://spellinguk raine.com; https://japan.mfa.gov.ua/en/news/73898-official-guidance-on-the-correct-spelling-and-usage-of-ukrainian-place-names.

The presence of different languages within these contributions is not a matter of 'accuracy' or of being 'true' to a name. Rather, it becomes a way of emphasising and honouring the different languages used in the knowledge produced and disseminated by this special issue. It is also a way to visualise inevitable language-based lacunae and the tensions within debates about theatre's capacity to bear witness to the violence and injustice that has been endured by the Ukrainian people.

Theatre as a Witness to War

As these debates about embodied memory and politics of linguistic practices illustrate, the act of bearing witness at a time of war is a complex ethical process. After all, the process of testifying to an event always involves forms of representational practice and the act of describing, speaking, or performing 'what has happened' necessitates some engagement with communicative processes. Writing about processes of witnessing in response to the Holocaust, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben draws attention the two meanings of the word 'witness', pointing out that in Latin, the etymology of the word has two roots. One 'signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party', and therefore can attest to what they saw but not necessarily what they directly lived through,[26] and the second 'designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it'.[27] However, at a time of ongoing war there are also many situations where these distinctions between the witness-as-first and the witness-as-third start to give way and two forms of witnessing begin to blur into one another. The blurring between different forms of witnessing and the complexity of attesting to what has been observed or experienced is evident in many of the essays that follow.

26. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 17.

27. Ibid.

Traditionally, scholars tend to adopt an objective position when discussing a particular performance, event, or idea. Yet at a time of ongoing war, such critical distancing needs to be rethought. As many of these essays reveal, the process of writing and the act of bearing witness becomes an iteration of survival which must navigate the personal costs of war, the sorrow and disruption of migration, the loss of loved ones, and the emotional toll of finding oneself living within a conflict. The impacts of the war, of displacement, and the ramifications of russia's acts of aggression across Global political contexts means that lives – and therefore the act of writing itself – are constantly being upturned and remade. As a consequence, many authors write from the position of being witnesses in both the first and third degree; they write to address both what they have observed but also what they are having to live through, what they are doing to survive, and how the war has reshaped their understanding of day-to-day realities. In this sense, to write about an ongoing conflict is to both witness and navigate writing processes that refuse to stay neatly on the page but which instead spill over into the shock, devastation, and visceral fear of ongoing violence and the consequences of this.

The problematic of bearing witness to that which feels unspeakable is explored in the first of the research articles in this issue. In 'Stages of Conflict: Applied Theatre and the Ukrainian Experience of War (2014–2024)', Olga Danylyuk draws on her experience as a theatre director and a member of Ukraine's civil-military cooperation unit (CIMIC) to examine a series of productions in which theatre was mobilised to explore tensions between the real and the mediated at a time of ongoing war. Examining four applied theatre projects developed with young people in the east of Ukraine, Danylyuk

considers how testimony and oral histories were used to examine young people's experiences of everyday life under occupation and to draw out what feels unsayable in such contexts. The possibility of a form of theatre making that contributes to processes of witnessing, mourning, and healing is then explored in the following article by Valeriy Simonchuk and Amanda Stuart Fisher. In 'Antigone as Witness: Theatre making as a response to russia's war on Ukraine', the co-authors analyse the development of a Ukrainian-based performance that drew on elements of *Antigone* by Sophocles, which were placed in dialogue with testimony gathered in the aftermath of the russian occupation of the town of Bucha, where in March 2022 hundreds of Ukrainian civilians and prisoners or war were killed by russian armed forces. Through their discussion of the development of the play, the authors consider how theatre can contribute to processes of care and communal grieving, examining the ethical imperatives of the project, at a time when truth-telling was being co-opted by russian propagandist mechanisms.

In the following article, Jitka Pavlišová directs her attention to the lived experiences of the women and children who left Ukraine as refugees. In 'Coming Closer: Dance as Embodied Response to Russian War Aggression', Pavlišová examines the traumatic experiences of Ukrainian dancers who fled their homes in Ukraine, following the full-scale invasion in 2022. Drawing on the concept of 'PerformMemory'[28] (Zami 2020) and exploring three dance pieces that were created in theatres in East-Central Europe, Pavlišová examines how the trauma of war is inscribed on the dancer's bodies and embodied through three different choreographic processes. In these pieces, Pavlišová argues, the traumatic memory of war and an insistence for Ukrainian survival is placed in dialogue with the different political histories of other countries within East Central Europe.

28. Layla Zami, *Contemporary PerforMemory: Dancing Through Spacetime, Historical Trauma, and Diaspora in the 21st Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

The politics and responsibility of theatre at a time of war is then examined in Justyna Kowal's article 'Future Tribunals: Performing Responsibility and Justice in Polish Theatre After 2022'. Here, Kowal examines how Polish theatre makers have created theatre in response to russia's war on Ukraine. Through her analysis of works by Sasha Denisova and Jakub Skrzywanek, Kowal considers how theatre making contributes to postwar juridical processes and how contemporary Polish theatre makers are re-imagining the borderline between theatre and law.

The final research article examines the role of digital performance as a form of performed resistance to russia's war against Ukraine. In 'Amber and Fire: Masculinities and War in *die.könige* (Resistance Theatre)', Yana Meerzon and Diego Moschkovich draw on their analysis of a webzine performance produced by Театр Сопротивления [Resistance/Theatre], to consider how new digital performance practices are creating forms of 'digital diasporic activism' to enact modes of resistance against the war. In their examination of *Die Kőnig* (2023), created by Diego Moschkovich and theatre director Vova Bocharov, the authors consider how digital performances such as this, enable russophone politically exiled artists to articulate their opposition to the war. In this performance, the authors argue, the

artists address complex themes of identity, vulnerability, queerness, and resistance (p. X), without being subject to censorship and other modes of oppression. These contemporary forms of digital activism address 'the emotional toll' of exile, examining feelings of guilt, displacement, and isolation 'that shape the lives' of russophone artists who have left russia and are now living in exile (p.130).

The theme of exile, performance, and identity is then picked up in the first essay in the Documents section. In 'Innovation, Institutionalization and the experimental sparkle of independent Ukranian theatre', Molly Flynn, Ielizaveta Oliinyk, and Olena Myhashko stage a conversation reflecting on the ways Ukrainian theatre artists have responded to different local, national, and global contexts, ideas, and events and how arts institutions themselves have shifted and changed in response to russia's war against Ukraine. Their dialogue emerges from a transnational and transtemporal web of influences, which includes the post-Soviet development of independent Ukrainian theatre, the start of the russian war in 2014, the Ukrainian theatre system and its resources, the Western idea of 'post-Soviet' or Global East countries, and Ukraine's own imaginaries of Ukrainianness and Europeanness.

In the following essay, Aneta Głowacka further interrogates the theme of artistic and institutional responses of theatre to the full-scale aggression by focusing on how Polish theatre engaged with refugee Ukrainian artists and theatre workers. In 'The Russian War in Ukraine in Polish Theater: Snapshots' Głowacka examines a series of artistic, institutional, and financial initiatives in relation to supporting the employment and active participation of Ukrainians in Polish theatre. Głowacka draws attention to a particular paradox related to the impact of these initiatives. On the one hand, they have reimagined what were once relatively ethnically homogeneous stages in Poland, transforming the institutional fabric of theatre beyond the immediate context of the war. On the other hand, however, the structure and resources of the Polish theatre system, together with the ongoing presence of war, have shaped and constrained these practices, limiting their broader and longer term impact. The impossibility for theatre to shield itself and others from war is a starting point for the next essay – 'Children in Theatre and Theatre for Children during the War in Ukraine' by Kasia Lech. Here, Lech focuses on theatre for children in Ukraine and in various other European countries. Building on Sara Ahmed's writing on 'affect' and Marvin Carlson's concept of 'ghosting', Lech explores how theatre amplifies children's subjectivity in the context of war, while also examining how children become continuous targets of various totalitarian and imperialistic wars across time and space. In so doing, she argues, theatre for and with children becomes a crucial instrument for advocating for human rights, children's rights, and for transitional justice.

The following three essays in the Documents section examine specific case studies, revealing the situated processes in which the russian war on Ukraine is transforming ideas, places, and traditions, and examining their positioning within global, epistemic, socio-geographical-political, and cultural spaces. Ewa Bal's essay 'The Queer Art of Overcoming

Failure: Ukrainian theatre testimonies of war regime' engages with queer artistic strategies in *H-Effect* (2020) and *Fucking Truffaut* (2023), directed by Roza Sarkisian. In her discussion of this work, Bal argues that Sarkisian employs queer strategies to offer a more critical and analytical perspective on war, patriotism and heroism than the ones provided by the theatre, which she argues, tends to nourish patriotism and encourages incitements to fight, and by the sympathetic gaze of Western European theatres. Through her analysis, Bal examines the epistemic gaps between communities that experienced russian colonialism and the countries that lack similar experiences. This leads her to argue that cognitive categories relating to queerness as developed in Anglo-American contexts must be revised in order to take account of knowledge situated in Central-Eastern Europe.

The specific situatedness of theatre and how the war transgresses this becomes the key focus for Anneli Saro, Natalia Skorokhod, and Katarina Tomps in their essay 'Vaba Lava Narva as a Transgressive Space between Estonia and Russia during Russia's War against Ukraine'. Building on Juri Lotman's notion of the semiosphere, they propose transgression as an analytical tool through which they analyse the institutional and artistic practices of the Estonian theatre company: Vaba Lava Narva. Located in the European Union, at the border between Estonia and russia, Vaba Lava Narva theatre exists in a community where the majority of Narva's residents are russian-speaking. Through their examination of the company's performances, made in response to the full-scale invasion, Saro, Skorokhod, and Tromps investigate how Vaba Lava Narva examines and transgresses diverse state-, language-, and ideology-based tensions and borders.

Finally, in 'Stepping out of the Line: Ukrainian Ballet in Search of a Contemporary Identity' Christian Noack and Anna Seidl examine how classical ballet – although historically deeply intertwined with russian and soviet imperialism – becomes a platform for Ukraine's cultural and national resilience and resistance. Their engagement with histories of the ballet traditions in Ukraine becomes the backdrop against which they discuss the United Ukrainian Ballet (later known as the Ukrainian International Ballet), established in 2022 by the refugee artists in the Netherlands. Through an examination of this work, the authors examine various decolonising attitudes and practices through which the ballet becomes a platform for cultural diplomacy and resistance.

Performance and Practice: Looking Back, Looking Forward, Being in the Now

In her account of modes of witnessing in response to the Holocaust, historian Annette Wieviorka points out that the act of witnessing simultaneously speaks of an experience in the past while also addressing the contemporary discursive context in which this testimony is performed. In this sense, performance that bears witness always involves processes of looking backwards, while also responding to

the demands of contemporary moment. In addition, we might add that writing to document, remember, or understand events in the past is also a process that requires one to think about these events will be remembered in the future. Wieviorka argues that 'testimonies demonstrate that every individual, every life, every experience' is 'irreducibly unique', yet the performance of testimonies always relies on 'the language of the time in which they are delivered' and responds to 'questions and expectations motivated by political ideological concerns'.[29] To write about theatre's response to russia's war against Ukraine is also to reveal who we are as authors and editors. Such an act inevitably also reveals how we are choosing to respond to the political and ideological debates that are shaping this contemporary moment. This highlights the ethico-political dimensions of writing, whether this is a dramaturgical or embodied process or the act of writing a critical text. Writing about theatre's response to russia's war against Ukraine is to recognise the complex connections between the past and the present, words and violence, and speaking and not speaking. The essays that follow trace these collapsing and blurring binaries in order to address the past and the future and to explore what it means to exist within the precarity of the present moment of the 'now'.

29. Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), xii.

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