

“Undesirable Elements: Ukraine” shares story of Ukrainian history with diverse audience

by Olena Jennings, Ukrainian Weekly, May 28, 2023

NEW YORK – The Ukrainian Museum in New York City is hosting “Undesirable Elements: Ukraine,” written and directed by Ping Chong and Virlana Tkacz. Based on hours of interviews with participants, the show features people telling family stories that are interwoven to create a portrait of a community – in this, case of Ukrainian Americans in New York.

After a short introduction by Ms. Tkacz, participants representing various waves of Ukrainian immigration to New York took the stage. George Drance’s grandparents came to the U.S. before World War I. Julian Kytasty’s father arrived after World War II. Nariman Asanov, a Crimean Tatar, arrived in the 1990s. Lesya Verba came from Odessa in 2021. And Daria Kolomic was in Kyiv when Russia launched its full-scale war on Ukraine in February 2022.

A date was spoken by someone, but who? People in the audience looked to find the speaker, but it was too late. The group on stage repeated the date and then they all clapped in unison. A major event in Ukrainian history was revealed.

And so it began: the participants on stage narrated how their ancestors were shaped by the event and later they discussed how they themselves were shaped by the event.

“Undesirable Elements,” a series started by Mr. Chong in the fall of 1992, is interview-based theater featuring local community members telling their own stories of place, identity and belonging.

Ms. Tkacz, having worked with Mr. Chong in the past, met him at the St. George Ukrainian Festival in New York. He proposed doing a Ukrainian “Undesirable Elements” and Ms. Tkacz had five perfect people in mind.

The five people in the show, connected by their roots to Ukraine and by their love for music, were Julian Kytasty, a third-generation bandura player; Daria Kolomic, a DJ, musician and activist; George Drance, an actor and priest; Lesya Verba, a singer and bandura player; and Nariman Asanov, a violinist.

Music was included at different points in the performance. In those moments, it was as if the audience could see the performers reveal their souls. They were all beautiful in their own way. When Ms. Verba spoke of a blackout and then sang in the dark, her voice seemed to bend to reach the audience.

The audience seemed to be transported not only by the music, but also by the voices of the performers. If members of the audience closed their eyes, they could almost feel themselves transported to the underground facilities where Ms. Kolomic hid at the beginning of the Russian invasion, the youth



Photo by Pavlo Terekhov

conference where Mr. Drance’s grandparents met or the concert hall where Mr. Asanov decided to defect. The show left memories of Mr. Kytasty’s bandura, Ms. Kolomic’s bells, Mr. Drance’s voice, Ms. Verba’s singing and Mr. Asanov’s violin.

There were many other touching moments. When Ms. Kolomic spoke of the Holodomor and her great-grandmother, there was a vivid mental picture of a girl being sent off to a country where there was food, the train receding in the distance. The haunting image guided the audience to the next part of the performance.

Other moments included humor. For example, Mr. Kytasty spoke of the time he played the contemporary music of John Cage and asked his father whether he liked it. He got a more definitive “no” than he expected. Or, when Ms. Kolomic spoke of her life as a reality television star, she explained that she glamorously hung on until almost the end of the contest.

It was important to include a Crimean Tatar perspective in the piece as well. Doing so revealed the diversity of people in Ukraine. One could feel the crowded cattle cars in which many people died during their forced deportation from Crimea of 1944. Mr. Asanov’s violin served to memorialize the tragedy.

Music can inspire people. For Mr. Drance found inspiration in his faith, which was kindled in school at a Jesuit university. he subsequently went into the priest- hood, though he never lost his desire to act and sing.

The music in the piece helped to increase the pacing, to form a connection with the audience. It also didn’t let one dwell on tragedy, focusing on hope and redemption. The stories discussed in the show resonated and left a lasting impression. They also don’t require an elaborate set; they can be performed anywhere, yet the sounds and stories “Undesirable Elements: Ukraine” are what make the performance memorable.