

Yara Arts Group brings 'Magic of Light' to Chicago

by Sofiia Dobko

CHICAGO – In November of last year, Yara Arts Group brought their show “The Magic of Light” to Chicago to share the story of artist Profiry Martynovych and kobzar Ostap Veresai with audiences in the Midwest.

The show, created by Virlana Tkacz, Tom Lee and Julian Kytasty, stands as a testament to a mastery of combining meaning and form. It is an exquisitely complex, multi-layered show of mixed media that interweaves the seemingly disparate storylines of the young Ukrainian artist Profiry Martynovych, the blind epic singer Ostap Veresai, and the oppressive anti-Ukrainian policies of late 19th-century tsarist Russia.

The main narrative centers around a historic 1875 concert where Veresai introduced the epics of Ukraine to a metropolitan audience, singing “How Three Brothers Escaped from the Fortress Called Azov,” accompanied by Martynovych’s drawings projected via magic lantern.

This epic song frames the entire perfor-

mance, acting as a crucial, connective thread that leads the viewer from one timeline to another – be it the personal story of Martynovych or the active presence of the three brothers that become tangible characters facing tribulations on their way home after they escaped from Azov Fortress.

Despite the potentially overwhelming density of action and temporal shifts, the audience never loses the conceptual thread, thanks to the dynamic and intentional deployment of mixed media. Visual and auditory intentionality is read behind every element: large puppets inspired by Japanese tradition and smaller figures echoing the Ukrainian Vertep tradition are operated by performer and designer Mr. Lee; Mr. Kytasty’s live bandura music provides the vocal texture for Veresai’s epics; and light effects, poetry and strategic projections keep the audience anchored. Every medium is a deliberate narrative choice, ensuring that the story’s complexity remains cohesive.

This structure is ultimately fractured by a final stroke. A final storyline unveils itself



Zlata Godunova (left) and Michele Stine take part in a performance of Yara Arts Group’s “The Magic of Light” in Chicago.



Tom Lee acts with a large puppet of Porfiry Martynovych and his drawings during a performance of Yara Arts Group’s “The Magic of Light” in Chicago. Evan Barr

as pictures of the harsh realities of the current war in Ukraine appear on the projection screens. It bluntly reminds spectators that the historical Russian imperial ambitions from the 19th century to erase anything and everything Ukrainian are not history, but rather an active, destructive force against independent Ukraine.

At this point, the spectators transform into contemporary witnesses and participants. The entire story weaves itself seamlessly across centuries, connecting past imperial oppression to the present struggle.

“The Magic of Light” manages not only to deliver a cohesive, complex, multi-medium narrative, but it does so in a way that profoundly touches the mind and the heart of the attentive viewer. When one feels momentarily lost within the narrative’s

puzzle, the next scene or visual element skillfully ties the threads back together. The audience was never truly lost watching this play. Rather, like Martynovych, who, as the script suggests, “discovers the light in dark times,” the audience is guided toward a sudden, illuminating clarity of historical and contemporary realities.

For those who wish to learn more about the show, the production’s vision is captured in the publication of “The Magic of Light.” This comprehensive volume includes the complete script, translations of the featured epics by Ms. Tkacz and Ms. Phipps, and insightful essays from the creative team – director Ms. Tkacz, bandurist Mr. Kytasty, and puppeteer Mr. Lee. The book can be ordered online at <https://itas-cabooks.com/products/the-magic-of-light>.



Julian Kytasty’s live bandura music provides vocal texture during a performance of Yara Arts Group’s “The Magic of Light” in Chicago.