

Ira Melkonyan: 'War violence asks for binaries'

I read Sruti Bala's reaction to the opening night of SPRING festival a few days after it was published.

It took me another few days to process and untangle my emotions.

My first action was to reach out to my community to check in on my own blind spots.

Why does expression of pacifism and desire for peace in Ukraine make me feel sad, lonely and angry?

An idea, which at its core does resonate with me. I also want peace. I also disapprove of military-industrial complex. I do share an opinion that weapons are evil, masculine ('did share' is more truthful at this point); war is not part of the true feminist worldview, and I do identify as a practicing feminist.

I also identify as a Ukrainian, and hence I am no neutral party.

I called my parents first. We spoke about how to remain anti-war. In the conversation with mum and dad, this question was extended though- how to remain anti-war when the war entered your house. When the war literally prevents you from being safe in your own home. I might scream in the face of the invading force "You are not my enemy, I am anti-war", I have doubts this saves my life. We didn't conclude any answers on the ethics of 'how'. My mum got too engaged screaming at me "I am not a nationalist, don't let them call me a nationalist; I support this fight because I want to return home". I had to hang up. "Too emotional is an unproductive way of leading this discussion", I thought.

Then I reached out to an artist friend. She is also Ukrainian, she also lives in the Netherlands. Together we pondered on the subtleties between such words as "to win", "to overcome", "to resist" and "to non-violently protest". She brought to my attention the connection between the choice of the folklore repertoire of Dakha Brakha, which draws its power from cultural and historical resistance of multiple generations of Ukrainians. We thought, perhaps the visuals could be more nuanced to satisfy the broader European audiences. (Another question is whether being satisfied is a powerful force towards recognising and discussing differences).

In my view, clarity and unambiguity in the band's political stand is productive. Ukraine does need arms to protect my grandma, relatives and friends who are currently in Odesa and other regions. Russia is an invading force, a terrorist state. I am strongly convinced of the necessity to think beyond binaries, but I find it a much more delicate process now. War violence asks for binaries; it doesn't leave much space for the gentle and soft shades of pastel (which I used to love). No war simply dissolves or gets resolved on its own; this more-than-human entity dictates binary rhetoric of victory or loss. And only after it is firmly put to an end we can discuss the nuances of what sort of victory is that, a victory that encompasses mourning lost people, destroyed cities, rebuilding ruins. Today, one must be firm in recognising and naming the perpetrator in order to gather forces, resist, fight back, defend and protect oneself. One must be clear in their civil position. It is a delicate dance between determination and introspection. I could imagine, this might be something most of the people would agree with me upon, despite some of them not agreeing with the black-on-white statements accompanying the DakhaBrakha gig.

Moreover, I want to add a historical nuance to the contemporary anti-war position. During the Vietnam war, it was the citizens of the aggressor-state who shouted "No war!", addressing it to their own government. Vietnam at the same time was fighting. Friends of Vietnam in other countries were clearly demanding: "Out of Vietnam!". Expecting from any

Ukrainian today, artist or not, to be anti-military is awkward, as we did not have a choice to start the war or not, we were put in this situation by the aggressor-state.

I spoke to a number of other friends, colleagues and peers, from and outside of Ukraine to help me understand my anger and sadness after reading the article. One of them highlighted how my presence in her life reminds her of the Ukrainian perspective when it might be so seductive to lean into the comfort of looking away, forgetting about the at-times distant from the Western European point of view war (she is a German theatre academic, since identity seems to matter in these words I am writing here). She encouraged me to quit trying to undo my emotionality and instead to write from the emotions the article evoked.

Taking Darya Tsymbalyuk's writing about the embodied and uncomfortable knowledge of a body that went through war, my peer Victoria Myronyuk takes it further to articulate the term of "a broken spectator". Together they ask: "Does academia - (and theatre)- have space for the embodied knowledge of war that is overlooked by mainstream Western narratives?"

"When academics 'westplain 'Russia's war against Ukraine, they reinforce a culture of detachment. There is not much space for lived experiences of war in academia outside of texts and research analysis. A body that lives through a war is an uncomfortable body. Although our disciplines offer us intricate theoretical understandings of traumatic experiences...academia too often turns out to be about 'sticking to business as usual' — a disembodied place of privilege."

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-022-01369-9>

I was not in Ukraine when the full scale invasion started. My body did not live the reality of drones and missiles terrorising my night sleep. Yet I wake up every morning to updates of whether my hometown was attacked last night or not. My post-premiere drinks in a foyer of a theatre are interrupted with quick checks of Facebook updates where I am notified that another friend or person I knew is killed under Bakhmut (my motivation to donate to Come Back Alive, because I want them to have good ammunition which will raise their chances to indeed come back alive). It feels confronting to get in touch with that reality I am physically distant to. It takes time to untangle my emotions and face my privilege of safe life in the Netherlands. And it is also lonely at times to be reminded that the Dutch society I am part of is an extra step distant from my point of experiencing this war.

Musicians of Dakha Brakha are uncomfortable bodies carrying the embodied knowledge of war. I was there in Utrecht to try and listen to their perspective to the best of my extent; I understand that the glorification of the smiling soldier is their way of saying "We are able to be here and play this music in Utrecht because these soldiers are protecting our immediate families and people we care for back in Kyiv". It's a tribute, it's a complex and confronting idea for distant European us, yet I hear and understand their point of view. I am hoping for more occasions where these distant parts of the Dutch society can find themselves together in one place, confronted by each other, perhaps facilitated by art. I am hoping for more places and occasions where I have a chance to challenge someone else's pacifism, and where others might teach me to be a better anti-military feminist. I am open to this possibility, I'd be happy to do it together.