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Providing Resilience: „Hamlet” in a Ukrainian Bomb Shelter and Basement

The majority of Shakespeare's plays make mention of war and Hamlet is no exception. Although not the primary focus of the play, the ongoing conflict with Norway underpins much of the plot. Fortinbras, the Prince of Norway, even has the final lines in the play as he makes his way home through Denmark with his army after attacking Poland.

Productions and adaptations over the years (both domestic and foreign) have both emphasized and downplayed the military theme in the play. This paper would like to focus on a recent Ukrainian production which makes use of the play to, among other things, update the story and reflect on the consequences and implications of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Ivano-Frankivsk staging of Hamlet by the Frankivsk Drama Theater had its premiere in 2017. The most dramatic performance, however, took place on the sixteenth day of the invasion in 2022 when the play was staged in the basement of the Theater which also served and still serves as a bomb shelter and had been used as temporary housing for refugees from Eastern Ukraine. This play, making use of a new translation of the play by the Ivano-Frankivsk native Yuriy Andrukhovych, provided a powerful message of both resilience and resistance for the audience in attendance.

Ukrainian Shakespeare has been frequently closely connected with the theme of war and struggle. The first staging of a Shakespeare play in the Ukrainian language took place during the struggle of the Ukrainian People's Republic against the Russian army. The first Hamlet, during the German occupation of Ukraine, was also a story of struggle. This most recent Hamlet continues in this tradition and will be the focus of our analysis.