Yana Meerzon[1]

"THE CHORUS PERISHES" – ON ESTHER BOL'S THEATRE OF CATASTROPHE

In his book *Death in Modern Theatre* (2019), Adrian Curtin discusses how representation of death changed in modern theatre after two catastrophic events of the mid-20th century – the Holocaust of the Jewish people and the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan. One such change relates to the devaluing of a human life. As warranted by wars, climate disasters, and other global crises, catastrophe makes death trivial, a mere fact of our existence, and so constantly recapped and heavily mediatized, catastrophe makes it impossible for us to grieve properly. Theatre of catastrophe, I argue, focuses its artistic investigation on the causes and consequences of mass destruction and death, it also documents social, political, and ethical processes that caused them. Yet, it often uses devices of sensationalism, melodrama, and affect to depict and transmit the sense of immediacy and disaster that catastrophe carries. The work of Esther Bol, Russian contemporary playwright, with a clear antiwar and pro-Ukrainian position, constitutes my case study. It allows me to examine how in the theatre of catastrophe the fate of many takes over the fate of one, and how this art form capitalizes on the sense of horror as experienced by the victims of mass death and on the sense of irredeemable guilt that a bystander feels, when watching the catastrophe unfolding in front of their eyes.
Key-words: *Theatre of catastrophe, Greek tragedy, dark catharsis, Esther Bol /Asya Voloshina, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Antigone*

In his book *Death in Modern Theatre* (2019), Adrian Curtin discusses how representation of death changed in modern theatre after two catastrophic events of the mid-20th century – the Holocaust of the Jewish people and the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan; the events that occupy a very special place "within the twentieth century's catalogue of horrors involving mass death"[2]. One such change relates to devaluing of a human life. As warranted by wars, climate disasters, and other global crises, catastrophe makes death trivial, a mere fact of our existence, and so it causes "deindividuation, lack of agency, incomprehensibility, meaninglessness, death-in-life, and extinction" of human species[3]. Constantly recapped and heavily mediatized, catastrophe makes it impossible for us to grieve properly. "We read about lives lost and are often given the numbers, but these stories are repeated every day, and the repetition appears endless, irremediable," Judith Butler wrote famously[4].

[1] University of Ottawa.
[2] Adrian Curtin, *Death in Modern Theatr*e, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2019, p. 135.
[3] S.M. Gilbert, *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve,* New York, W.W. Norton, 2006, p. 137.
[4] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, New York, Verso, 2009, p. 13.

> And so, we have to ask, what would it take not only to apprehend the precarious character of lives lost in war, but to have that apprehension coincide with an ethical and political opposition to the losses war entails? Among the questions that follow from this situation are: How is affect produced by this structure of the frame? And what is the relation of affect to ethical and political judgment and practice?[5]

Theatre of catastrophe, I would like to demonstrate in this article, turns to these questions directly. Not only it often focuses its artistic investigation on the causes and consequences of mass destruction and death[6], it also engages with the questions that Judith Butler puts forward. As a particular artistic frame to evoke catastrophe and its consequences for its audiences, this theatre aims to document social, political, and ethical processes that caused the catastrophe and it uses devices of sensationalism, melodrama, and affect to depict and transmit the sense of immediacy and disaster that catastrophe carries.

Yet, Annette Becker, a renowned historian of the First World War, insists on a clear distinction between tragedy and catastrophe. "In a tragedy, – she explains – we are equal in relation to each other […], whereas in a catastrophe, as with the Shoah, there is no equality between those who kill and whose who are killed"[7]. Tragedy carries a sense of something noble, but catastrophe is defined by "the horror of mass death, [which] is not the same as mass murder" [8]. That is why when it comes to the soldiers who perished on the war fronts, we tend to produce "the respect for the war grave" and to "re-humanize the dead"; with the catastrophes of mass death, like Holocaust, there are no graves left. "Everything is done to hide the traces," to erase "all tangible signs of death," to show no respect to the dead, and not to bury them[9].

Theatre of catastrophe seems to capitalize on this sense of horror as experienced by the victims of mass death and on the sense of irredeemable guilt that a bystander feels, when watching the catastrophe unfolding in front of their eyes. And so, spectacle and agitation often become leading artistic devices that the theatre of catastrophe employs; they create and uphold the feelings of sensationalism, which then turn into substitute to catharsis. Instead of recognition and reversal that follow the fall of a tragic protagonist in a classical tragedy, theatre of catastrophe aims to document an immediate impact of the disaster, i.e. its sensationalist aspect, but not its consequences. Like a journalistic reportage or a social media posting, theatre of catastrophe relies on commotion and spectacle, and thus like journalism it also faces the questions of effectiveness[10]. Studying theatre of catastrophe, one might want to ask: Are sensationalism and alarmism truly effective in dealing with catastrophe? What is the real time of the catastrophe? Is it just one's present moment, with the

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[5] *Ibidem*.
[6] Adrian Curtin, *Death in Modern Theatr*e, *op. cit.*, p. 143.
[7] Annette Becker, « Catastrophe vs. Tragedy » in *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire*, 118 | 2014, [online]. http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/1094 (accessed December 16, 2023)
[8] *Ibidem*.
[9] *Ibidem*.
[10] Andrew Weaver, "The 'Gulf Stream' Will not Collapse in 2025: What the Alarmist Headlines got Wrong," in *The Conversation*, August 3, 2023, [online]. https://theconversation.com/the-gulf-stream-will-not-collapse-in-2025-what-the-alarmist-headlines-got-wrong-210773 (accessed December 16, 2023).

victims rarely looking into what brought the catastrophe and what might happen after it? And finally, can theatre of catastrophe be redemptive, as to indicate to its audiences a way out of the calamity?

The work of Esther Bol[11], Russian contemporary playwright, with a clear antiwar and pro-Ukrainian position, constitutes my case study to examine how in the theatre of catastrophe Chorus devours individual, so in its meaning and significance the fate of many takes over the fate of one.

Esther Bol's Theatre of Catastrophe

In his book *Theatre de la catastrophe*, Francois Laplantine identifies four dimensions of a catastrophe be it a human made disaster or an environmental one. They are 1) temporal dimension, 2) an event of a cosmic power, something that can be recognized as disastrous with no ambiguity to what its reasons or consequences can be, 3) surprise that causes disappointment – the suffering submerged within the action, which is also confused, interrupted, destroyed", but also confrontation between "an experience of the undoing and the failure"[12], and 4) catastrophe as a disastrous event in the off-stage as a leading device of a new tragic narrative: "catastrophe always instigates creation of a narrative, a set of images, or a theatrical production"[13]. Greek tragedy, as Laplantine reminds us, speaks from this place of *katastrophé* – the space of destruction, apocalypse, and complete defeat. This is the action of its closing act: "the bad news announced by a messenger at the beginning of the play will come true. We cannot escape an inexorable destiny"[14]. Yet, *catharsis* as a dramaturgical ingredient of Greek tragedy seems to be ruled out in the theatre of catastrophe; thus, making affinities between theatre of the catastrophe and Greek tragedy problematic. Esther Bol's theatre has a special power to document and transmit the effect and the time of the catastrophe. For her, today's tragedy cannot be compared to the Greek one. Today's theatre, Bol strongly believes, searches for its unique forms of catharsis; and so, when it wishes to speak in tragic terms it must focus on lives fully ruined and destroyed. It must reject melodrama of the everyday to seek existential and metaphorical terms to speak of the catastrophe[15]; and thus, it must put a Chorus character (not individual protagonist) in the centre of its conflict. Like in a Greek tragedy, Chorus of the catastrophe stands for the voice of people – specifically, it serves as a mouthpiece of the victims and of the dead. Language plays a leading part in the theatre of catastrophe, with lamentations, incantations and rhythmized speeches/songs of Chorus gesturing toward mass death. To present catastrophe as an act of devaluation of a single life, Esther Bol turns to the character of tragic Chorus:

[11] Esther Bol is a penname of the Russian playwright Asya Voloshina. I use the name Esther Bol in the body of this article, but when it comes to citations and bibliography, I cite her plays and interviews which she published before this change took place – in the summer of 2022 and because of the artist's decision to cease her ties with Russia.

[12] François Laplantine, *Théâtre de la catastrophe : expérience des situations extrêmes et création artistique,* Paris, Le Pommier, 2022, p. 7.

[13] "*Une catastrophe suscite toujours une mise en récit, une mise en images, une mise en scène*", François Laplantine, *ibidem*.

[14] "*La mauvaise nouvelle annoncée par un messager au début de la pièce se réalisera. Nous ne pouvons pas échapper à un destin inexorable*.", François Laplantine, *ibidem*.

[15] Asya Voloshina, "Personal Correspondence with the Author," July-August, 2022.

in her work, I will show next, "when the Chorus speaks, the voices of individuals who make it dissolve; the Chorus devours its members"[16].

Born in 1985, Esther Bol graduated from the Russian

IMAGE 1 – Esther Bol. Personal photo.

The book of four plays – *The Chorus Perishes. Four Plays about Russia*[17] – presents Esther Bol as one of the most politically outspoken Russian playwrights, who finds it impossible to live in Russia today. To her, it is hard to write about love, art, the artist's purpose, or responsibility, as well as powerlessness of the intellectual today.

[16] Esther Bol, *Conversation with the Author*, Zoom, November 10, 2023.
[17] Asya Voloshina, *Gibnet khor. Chetyre piesy o Rossii,* St. Petersburg, Seans, 2018.

> I left Russia right after the war in Ukraine started. I loved Russia for 37 years, until February 24, 2022. With the first attack on Ukraine, my heart was burned out. [...] Before the war, I thought I could do more good in Russia. With my anti-totalitarian plays, some direct statements in interviews, going to rallies. On February 24, it became clear that this was an illusion.[18]

To Esther Bol, it is essential to speak about the will of humans, both in the sense of 'freedom' and in the sense of 'daring': "'When they take away our will, they take away our freedom, and vice versa: when they take away our freedom, they take away our will.' […] This is what they have done to my country [Russia - YM]. This is what has brought about the catastrophe we are witnessing right now"[19]. As she further clarifies, "all claims to power, authority, pressure, external violence, repressive apparatuses and mechanisms metaphysically refer to the fact that without freedom there is no audacity, and vice versa – without daring there is no freedom"[20]. Bol's interest in epic dramatic forms, her work on Chorus and her critique of the state oppression, violence and civil war mobilize her fight against Putin's totalitarianism and militarization of the country. With the productions of her plays being banned in Russia and to signal "the totality of the catastrophe, the insurmountable nature of the rupture and the impossibility of any form of return"[21], her 2022 play *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine* is the writer's direct response to the war in Ukraine; it is a new type of tragedy – the tragedy of catastrophe "with the dark catharsis"[22].

Case study one – *Antigona: Reduction*

I begin my study of the evolution of the function and the place of Chorus in Esther Bol's theatre of catastrophe with her 2013 play *Antigona: Reduction*[23]. One of the most influential tragedies of the Western theatre canon, Sophocles' *Antigone* has served politically aware artists as an instrument of resistance and protest to the oppressive regimes for centuries. Esther Bol builds on this tradition. Subtitled 'a political satire with elements of poetry and reduction', her *Antigona: Reduction* recasts Sophocles' title character, Antigone, from an existential tragic figure to a political rebel, whose actions of protest become inevitably and ironically performative in the highly mediatized culture of social media influencers, business moguls, and performative post-truth.

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[18] Voloshina in Alik Spiridonov, "« Udar po Ukraine vyzheg mne cerdce ». Rossiiskii dramaturg o trebovanii ubrat' svoe imya z afish," in VotTak, April 9, 2022, [online]. https://vot-tak.tv/novosti/09-04-2022-udar-po-ukraine (accessed December 16, 2023).

[19] Bol in Yana Meerzon, "'On the Rightlessness for Compassion or How to Redeem an Unredeemable Guilt'. [Asya Voloshina]/Esther Bol and Yana Meerzon: Dialogue," in *Critical Stages*, 2022 (26), [online]. https://www.critical-stages.org/26/on-the-rightlessness-for-compassion-or-how-to-redeem-an-unredeemable-guilt/ (accessed December 16, 2023).

[20] Bol in Yana Meerzon, 2022, *op. cit*.

[21] Note of Intent. *Le musée des histoires (non) imaginées*, [online]. https://www.sensinterdits.org/en/le-musee-des-histoires-non-imaginees-2/ (accessed December 16, 2023).

[22] Bol in Meerzon, Yana, 2022, *op. cit*.

[23] Original title is *Antigona: Redukciia.*

Written in 2013, a year after Vladimir Putin's return to power as Russia's president, *Antigona: Reduction* documents a so-called 'point of no return' in the modern history of Russia and predicts the horrific events of the post 2014 to come. The year 2012 signaled the end of the political and economic reforms in modernization put forward by Medvedev's government and the country's slide towards a right-wing nationalist agenda, which in 2014 resulted in the annexation of Crimea and in 2022 in a full-scale war in Ukraine. 2012 also happened to be one of the most intense years in the modern history of Russia's public protests and its suppressions. It saw the silencing of the anti-Putin Bolotnaya Square rally and the first public trials and imprisonment of the protesters, including the trial, conviction, and imprisonment of three members of the feminist performance art group Pussy Riot after they staged a 40-second Punk-Prayer inside Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on the 21st of February 2012.

A "political pamphlet on 'mature Putinism,' manifested through the suppression of mass protests against falsifications in the presidential and parliamentary elections and the subsequent tightening of the political regime"[24], *Antigona: Reduction* comments on many of these events. A dramatization of Antigone's solitary protest, it gestures toward the performativity of Pussy Riot's rebellion, and it also demonstrates that within the autocratic society, the only way for a citizen to be seen and to be heard is to perform an act of insolence within the mediatized public sphere. Media plays the most significant role in this act of resistance but also of reduction. Bol's text demonstrates that it is the energy of a televised transmission and populist propaganda that defines Antigone and her actions.

IMAGES 2 and 3 – Antigone/Reduction. New Stage Workshop, Alexandrinsky Teatr, St. Petersburg, 2014. Director Anfisa Ivanova. Photo: Tatiana Tumanova.

To Bol, modern tragedy cannot mimic the original Greek tragedy – because "the type of theatrical communication as it was practiced in Greek theatre has been irrevocably lost"[25] – but it can still seek forms of catharsis. To generate this new

[24] Katarzhyna Syska, "Antigona/Reduction Asi Voloshinoy. Performance bunta", Unpublished Manuscript, Email to the Author, August 20, 2022, p. 1.

[25] Voloshina in Natalia Sokolova, "Asya Voloshina: 'Khochetsya zanimat'sya teatrom, otsylajuschim k vertikali," in *Prochtenie,* January 19, 2018, [online]. https://lensov-theatre.spb.ru/pressa/asya-voloshina-hochetsya-zanimatsya-teatrom-otsylayuschim-k-vertikali/ (accessed December 16, 2023).

dramatic form, Bol uses strategies of literary quotation, gesturing to the original, borrowing and commentary, so in her plays these borrowed texts often appear as 'alien' [26]. Stylistically, her theatre reminds of the 1920s formalist theatre experiments, evidenced in her admiration of Osip Mandelstam's poetry and of the postmodernist search in performativity, including fragmentation, montage of citations, and palimpsest of borrowed texts; all of which serve as a vehicle to the authorial creative utterance and personal truth, Bol's "vision of ways out of the ideological crisis" [27] and the world of catastrophe.

Written in verse (Act One) and in prose (Act Two), *Antigona: Reduction* mixes myth with contemporary reality, but it "violates the main principle of the ancient myth – obedience to the gods. […] Voloshina excludes the Gods' intervention in Antigone's decision: to bury her brother and to die is only her choice"[28]. In addition, in Bol's adaptation of the Greek play, the function of the Chorus – the mouth-speaker of the people and of the author's own view on the conflict – is reduced as well. Here a Theban society is represented by two random bystanders – Old Demos and Young Demos – who symbolically and metonymically stand for the Russian people. Two Demoses appear on stage twice: in the first instance they are there to celebrate the wedding of the royal couple and in the second they arrive after Antigone is already arrested to cheer the second reiteration of the same wedding, now with the fake Antigone (Ismene dressed as Antigone) on stage. In this play, the Chorus is reduced to the collective figure of these Two Demoses, who in their disappointment with and fear of the regime, remain ambivalent if not indifferent to Antigone, someone who dares to take on the heroic role of the leader of the resistance. As Bol explains, her play demonstrates that in Russia

> Putin and the Russian people not only complement each other, they are mutually contaminated. […] The point is not to reveal the contaminated atmosphere between the Russian Creons and the Antibunts, but to show the contaminated atmosphere between them and the Demos, the people of the country[29].

This is how Bol depicts this tension – tyrant vs people, individual vs Chorus – in her play: in the new Thebes the structural power of the city is so corrupted that it's not just Creon who might serve as puppet in the hands of his own assistant/handler, it is also his people (Chorus) who can be seen as silent accomplices of Antibunt. The silence stands for conformism, and thus turns into complicity. Once again, Bol brings the Old Demos on stage, who teaches the Young Demos to forget his knowledge of the old truth and to accept the new one, to pretend that nothing has ever happened and to remember that obedience is the only tactic of survival available for them[30].

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[26] Larisa Tyutelova et all, "Transformation of 'Alien' Text as a Technology for Generating the New in Russian Drama of the 1990s–2010s," in *Technology, Innovation and Creativity in Digital Society: XXI Professional Culture of the Specialist of the Future,* edited by Daria Bylieva and Alfred Nordmann, Cham, Springer, 2022, p. 377.
[27] *Ibidem*, p. 386.
[28] Larisa Kislova, "Antichny myth v Russkoy 'Novoy drame' rubezha XX-XXI vekov", *Philology and Culture*, (2015), 42 (4), p. 223.
[29] Asya Voloshina, "Personal Correspondence", *op. cit*.
[30] Asya Voloshina, *Gibnet khor*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

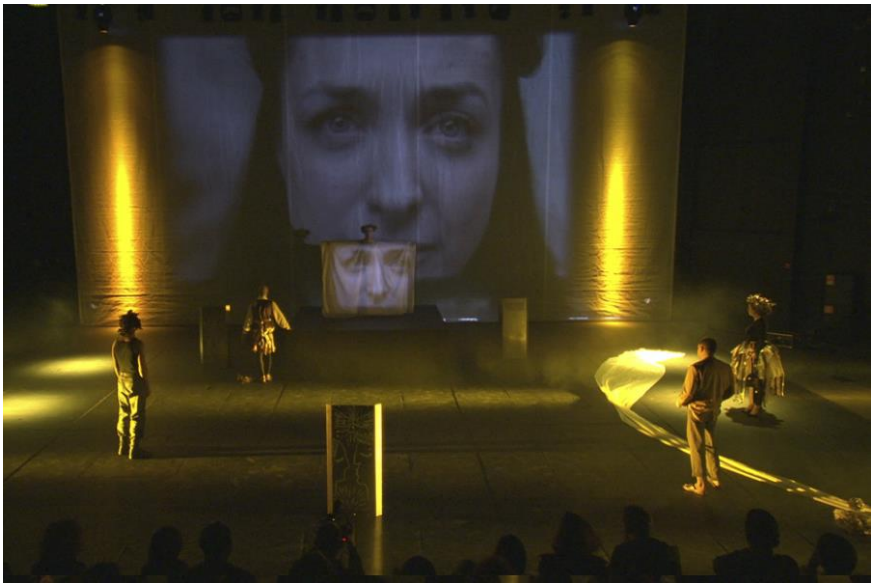


IMAGE 4 – Antigone: Reduction, Masterskaya Sovremennogo Teatra, St. Petersburg, 2020. Director Maria Galyazimova. Photo: Dmitry Yakubov.

Russian theatre has a long-standing tradition of questioning the unspoken bond between the people and the tyrant. Douglas J. Clayton argues that it was Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), who was among the first Russian writers to stage Russian people as a tragic Chorus and as accomplices to the crimes of the tyrant[31]. Bol's *Antgiona: Reduction* speaks to this tradition as well: one can trace the dramatic genealogy of Bol's tragic Chorus to Russia's first national tragedy – Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (written in 1825), which stages a complex interdependence between the state and the people. Written about a period of Russian history remote from Pushkin's time, *Boris Godunov* spoke of the 19th century Russia – a country on the verge of a revolution, "probably with a bloody overthrow of the emperor" [32]. Bol's play echoes Pushkin's interpretation of the Russian people as an "elemental force, fickle, [and] unpredictable power" that holds political potential for the revolt[33]. However, this unpredictable energy is hidden within the people's seeming indifference and apathy. Pushkin closed his tragedy with a symptomatic stage direction 'the people are silent', which pointed at the unspoken bond – contamination and interdependency – between the tsar and his people. This famous stage direction served as a warning sign of the dangerous potential that Russian people possess[34]: the Chorus can be silent, but their silence is never clear whether it is a sign of submission or brewing revolt.

In *Antigone: Reduction*, Bol issues a similar warning. With Old and Young Demoses representing the people of Thebes, a highly reduced in size and functions Chorus figure turns into a metonym of Pushkin's *narod*. But if in Pushkin's *Boris*

[31] Douglas J. Clayton, "Alexander Pushkin's Boris Godunov as Epic Theatre," in *History, Memory, Performance*, edited by Yana Meerzon, Kathryn Prince and David Dean, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 98.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 99.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 102.
[34] *Ibidem*, p. 103.

Godunov the silence of the people remains ambiguous, in this play there is nothing uncertain about Demoses and their standing. They choose to remain silent and keep safe, because these Demoses – like Bol's own audiences of 2013 – prefer personal comfort, economic stability, and the glamour of the rich over the truth. The ending of *Antigone: Reduction* speaks even more directly to this concrete moment of Russia's history: Antigone is dead now, while Thebes prepares for Haemon's second wedding. Unlike the Chorus of the Greeks, the people – the Two Demoses – stand in silence; they neither approve nor condemn the actions of the state; and thus, they allow Creon and his apparatchiks to play out their endgame.

With the war raging in Ukraine, as Bol states, there is no room left for hesitation, confusion, or compromise: the answer is only that – to fight against the aggressor is to side with the defenders of Ukraine. Written in 2013, before the annexation of Crimea and today's war, *Antgiona: Reduction* documents its own moment of history, when "almost no one went to the barricades" [35]. It speaks to the moral obligation of the artist, who, when they "seem to be powerless in the face of reality, can try to do something for the other, or maybe for oneself, to keep in us the ability to feel empathy, and not only for yourself, but also for all of humanity"[36].

Case study two – *The Chorus Perishes*

In Esther Bol's other play, *The Chorus Perishes* (2017), the action takes place during World War I. Its protagonist is a military doctor from St. Petersburg, who travels in a hospital train. He is surrounded by the voices of the fallen Russian soldiers, who make the Chorus of this play. The dialogue of the Chorus is semi-documentary, as it is based on the stories, observations, thoughts, and personal records of the Russian soldiers during the war, collected and transcribed by the sister of mercy Sofia Fedorchenko, who in 1917 published a book *People at War*, subtitled "Front Records". The play opens with the Prologue spoken by this Chorus: the lines gesture toward the catastrophe of WWI, during which mass killings have been introduced. To those who have experienced this catastrophe, the war permits neither catharsis nor redemption – only death and oblivion; and thus the Chorus speaks - "I don't know who is to blame, but I hate it so much, and it is so dark and so painful - I seek only death"[37]. In this play, the Chorus of the fallen soldiers makes a new version of Esther Bol's people. These soldiers "had been deprived of civilization, they are absolutely uneducated, and so are their words, thoughts, actions, and worldview"[38]. A figment of the protagonist's imagination, these soldiers represent both revolt of the masses and victims of history; and so the play forces its readers to shift their attention from the fate of one (Doctor) to the fate of many. Chorus becomes the core protagonist of this tragedy, whereas guilt – something as experienced by both the Doctor and the Author - drives this play forward. The play "was written in 2014, right after the annexation of Crimea […] and after the covert invasion of Russian troops in Eastern Ukraine. But the action takes

[35] Asya Voloshina, "Personal Correspondence", *op. cit*.
[36] Voloshina in Nevinnaya, Ivetta, „Dramaturg Asya Voloshina: 'Vse seichas v pole gigantskogo eksperimenta'," *Mk.RU,* May 15, 2020, [online]. https://www.mk.ru/culture/2020/05/15/dramaturg-asya-voloshina-vse-seychas-v-pole-gigantskogo-eksperimenta.html, (accessed December 16, 2023)
[37] Asya Voloshina, *Gibnet khor*, *op. cit*., p. 4.
[38] Asya Voloshina, "Personal Correspondence", *op. cit*.

place in 1914. The protagonist [Doctor – YM] has his own individual guilt: he shot a wounded soldier dead while performing a surgery because he could not stand anymore sawing flesh and bones without anesthesia. […] But he also feels an inherent, collective, existential guilt – for the ignorance, backwardness of the soldiers. For their medieval barbarity. For this unrepairable rupture. Deep down he knows his individual guilt (although he hides it until the very end, pushing it out)."[39]

IMAGE 5 – *The Chorus Perishes,* Fulcro Theatre, Director Daria Shanina, Photo: Alexander Khanin.

In his famous essay "On the Concept of History," Walter Benjamin describes Klee's painting 'Angelus Novus' as a metaphor of how one (a historian or an artist) looks at the past atrocities:

> [Klee's painting] shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[40]

A similar process takes place in *The Chorus Perishes*: by focusing the action of the play on the events of 1914, Esther Bol channels her own feelings of disaster and her sense of catastrophe that she experienced when witnessing the 2014 annexation of Crimea. In this play, historical distancing functions as the

[39] Asya Voloshina, "Personal Correspondence", *op. cit*.
[40] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings, Volume 4. 1938-1940,* translated by Edmund Jephcott and others, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard, Harvard UP, 2006, p. 392.

playwright's personal dramaturgical and emotional device of writing and protection: "it is as if I needed some kind of sense of alienation, to use the materials, the documents, and the facts of another war to talk about the one that was taking place in front of me," Esther Bol explains[41]. Yet, zooming on the voices of the dead soldiers helps Bol change the focus of this tragedy. The title of the play – "The Chorus Perishes" – gestures toward Joseph Brodsky's Nobel Prize lecture, in which he discussed the consequences of the global stand-off between totalitarianism and other political systems. In Brodsky's lecture, Esther Bol recollects, "the line goes: 'In a real tragedy, it is not the hero who perishes; it is the chorus.' In the play though, it is the hero who perishes […], but it's the Chorus that's dead right from the start" [42]. This is a typical device of the theatre of catastrophe: instead of studying the tragic fate of an individual, it looks at the tragedy of many. Yet, Esther Bol takes this device a bit further. In *The Chorus Perishes* an individual stands for an intellectual, who has lost their connection to the common people. "Already gone insane," Doctor continues to

> despis[e] this under-human mass of flesh and blood that obliterates itself in the meat grinder of war. Unless as the war does not grind all the masses, it will not stop. And he will be prevented from enjoying the refined urbane lifestyle that he used to enjoy in his previous life. He does not realize that his privilege makes him inherently, ancestrally, patrimonially responsible for their barbarity… And that's a kind of real tragic guilt[43].

In other words, in Esther Bol's theatre, it is only Chorus who can play the role of the tragic protagonist today, because it is only Chorus, "who can take on the role of all those who were tortured to death or murdered" [44].

Like in Greek tragedy, in Bol's play, the fate of the protagonist – the fate of Chorus – drives the plot forward.

> The ruined hero [Doctor - YM], blinded, about to shoot himself in the head, suddenly longs to hear a letter. But what he craves is not an exquisitely written letter from his artistic wife. He craves to hear one of those letters that a soldier's wife gets a literate neighbor to write to her husband for a dozen eggs. […] At the last moment of his life our refined intellectual savors these primitive words and dreams that one day he gets a love letter like this… Thus, the individual is completely swallowed and destroyed by Chorus. So, I describe this act as a symbol of our collective collapse. The collapse of those who play the role of Russian intellectual[45].

Once again, for Esther Bol this kind of conclusion is directly linked to the situation in Russia; and at that point of time, to the catastrophe of the annexation of Crimea: "The masses in Russia in 2014 rejoiced that our country stole a piece of land from its neighbor. Who bears the blame and responsibility for this? Who should feel

[41] Esther Bol, *Conversation with the Author*, *op. cit*.
[42] Asya Voloshina, "Personal Correspondence," *op. cit*.
[43] *Ibidem*.
[44] *Ibidem*.
[45] *Ibidem*.

the inherited, ancestral, patrimonial guilt?" [46]

Case study three – *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine*

Written as the playwright's immediate reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the play *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine*[47] is my last example of Esther Bol's theatre of catastrophe. Subtitled "screen prose or a horizontal group of plays," the play is dedicated to "all defenders" of Ukraine, with "all royalties from any public performance of this text [to] always go to Ukraine"[48]. The action takes place on the iPhone of the female character, YOU, a pro-Ukrainian Russian, who finds herself in the safety of exile trying to come to terms with guilt and shame she feels because of her country's crimes. A post-dramatic palimpsest, the text consists of newsfeeds from the Russian official media and Ukrainian Telegram channels, postings on social media, hate speech, YOU's private correspondence with her friends and relatives, and her unsent love letters. This is a verbatim play that absorbs and transcends the voices of a deeply polarized Russian society, mostly cosmopolitan urbanites, and gives space to Ukrainians, who both ridicule, condemn, and thank YOU for her anti-war position. By focusing the action on the character YOU, who experiences the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a political fiasco of her generation and her personal catastrophe, Esther Bol juxtaposes isolation of the individual with destruction of the group.

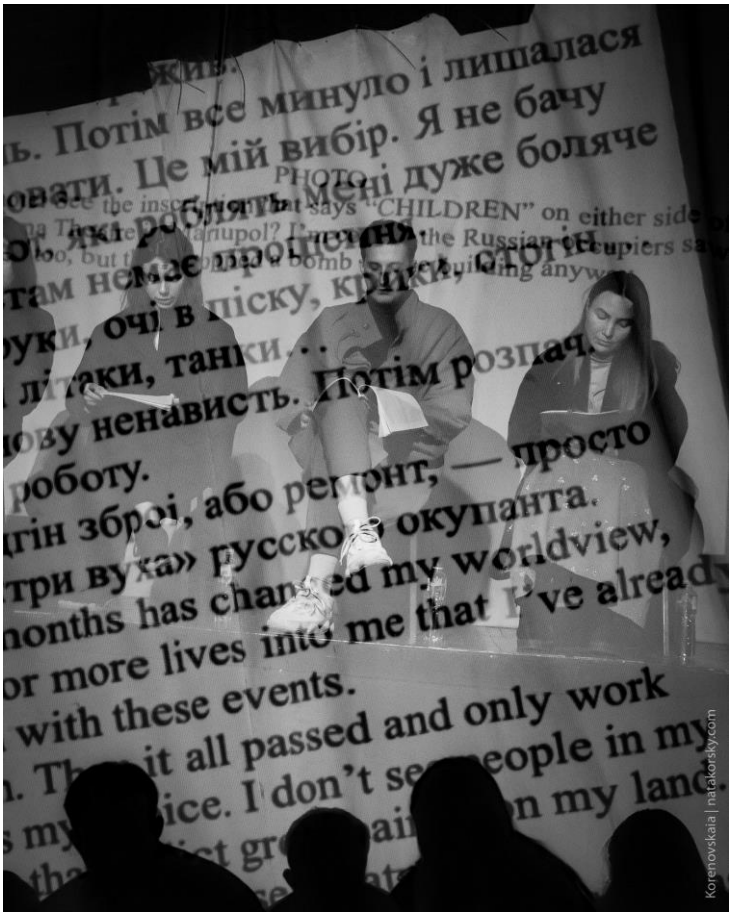
[46] *Ibidem*.

[47] In 2022, the play was published in Russian on Esther Bol's personal site and in English in the journal *Critical Stages.* The play was translated into French and, in 2024, will be published by L′espace d′un instant. Also, in January 2024, the play will be published in Russian by the Israel based publishing house Babel.

[48] Asya Voloshina, "CRIME/@AlwaysArmUkraine", translated by Ricardo Marin-Vidal, *Critical Stages*, 2022 (26), [online]. https://www.critical-stages.org/26/crime-alwaysarmukraine/; (accessed December 16, 2023), p. 1.


NOVAYA GAZETA TELEGRAM CHANNEL
No matter the cost, no matter the lies, the government is trying to show its people that this bloody massacre serves a purpose, and that the people need it as much as the Kremlin does.
Korenovskaia | natakorsky.com


Korenovskaia | natakorsky.com



IMAGES 6, 7 and 8 – *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine,*
The Lubimovka Echo Festival, Director Anastasia Patlay,
Belgrade, December 16-18, 2022. Photo: Nata Korenovskaia.

Exposed textuality is a literary device that characterizes Esther Bol's writing in this play. *Exposed textuality* refers to the presentation of a dramatic text on page as a constructed component of theatre rather than a 'natural' and 'spontaneous' element of performance; it makes "the apparatus of the theater visible"[49]. By exposing text as something specifically constructed for this dramaturgical event, Esther Bol creates a new literary space in which she reveals how the scripts of national propaganda, governing institutions, and politics dominate Russian discourse on Ukraine. This way she also reveals deep interconnectedness between the subjectivity of her own I, the author of the play, and the subjectivity of 'YOU', the character, marked by the immediacy of the war.

In the Russian version of the text, the protagonist is called "TY", which is translated into the English "YOU". This choice demands a brief explanation of the multifaceted significance of this pronoun in Bol's text. As well known, the Russian pronoun "TY" is reserved for informal communication between family members,

[49] Jürs-Munbe, Karen, "Text Exposed: Displayed Texts as Players Onstage in Contemporary Theatre," in *Studies in Theatre & Performance*, 2010, 30 (1), p. 102.

relatives, peers or close acquaintances, while a more formal "VY", very much like in French or German, is reserved for communication with the elderly people or one's superiors. The fact that Esther Bol chooses to name her protagonist "TY" signals close if not intimate proximity between the author and her character and thus suggests an autobiographical overtone of this play as well. Secondly, a pronoun "TY" can be also used as a self-referential construct, i.e. when one refers to themselves not as "I" but as "TY". This device can be found in autobiographical narratives, but also in those plays and stories that bear elements of a third-person narration. In this type of narrative, the author or the narrator is often found outside the described events of the story and provides either a limited or an objective point of view. Often such narrator refers to the characters by their names or by the third-person pronouns he, she, or they. When Esther Bol opts for "TY"/"YOU" – second person singular pronoun – to name her major character, she creates a sense of uncomfortable simultaneity – proximity and distancing – that characterizes the relationships between the author and the character in the first place, but also the connection between the character and the audience, and the author and the audience. For example, in relation to the author/character pairing, the use of "TY" suggests a heighten degree of the author's self-referencing but also self-distancing, and thus allows the author Esther Bol to detach herself from her protagonist. At the same time, the use of "TY" helps playwright to invite if not envelop the audience into the action. Because the character does not bear any specific common name (Mary, John, etc), the name "TY"/ "YOU" establishes certain meta-theatrical and intersubjective type of relationships between the character and the spectators. The play imagines spectators within the catastrophic events it describes, and it makes the audience become more aware about their own role in and responsibility for the catastrophe unfolding in front of their eyes. Certainly, many other Russian war migrants, political exiles, and even those who stayed behind in the country, could subscribe to the feelings of shame and guilt they felt for the actions of Putin's government and its supporters who initiated this full-scale invasion. Finally, the use of "TY" serves as a special interconnector between the author (Esther Bol) and her audience, to which I return a little later in this article. Hence, it is not surprising that the lines attributed to YOU are heavily interspersed by stage direction "breath". Each "breath" punctuates the rhythm of the catastrophe as agitation, as spectacle and as sensation, which is experienced simultaneously by an individual (YOU) and by a group.

Unlike in the plays discussed above, in *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine* Esther Bol uses no historical distance between her own experience of the invasion and the world of fiction she creates – here Bol writes verbatim, from the time within the catastrophe. Accordingly, the text of the play functions both as an act of documenting the catastrophe and as the record of the author's emotional state, in which many other Russian people including YOU, found themselves in the first weeks of the invasion. The time of this play is not historical, and it is not denoted by any literal devices of temporal distancing, it is the immediate time of here and now, the time of the historical catastrophe – or even myth, as Bol suggests[50] - from which there is no escape. To exit the space of this tragedy, YOU can do only one thing – she can only step out of the world of fiction into the reality of her audience. To help YOU cross this fiction/reality

[50] Esther Bol, *Conversation with the Author*, *op. cit*.

border, Esther Bol uses the devices of Brechtian epic theatre: first, she creates the idea of and the conditions for a dramaturgical rupture or interruption, then she invites her character to step into them.

The play consists of 18 segments, with the last one numbered "0", not "18". This is the moment of Brechtian rupture, when the character rebels against the dramatic logic of her own play and against the author, who writes it. In segment "17", YOU suddenly realizes that the love of her life, Ignat, a Ukrainian artist, has been killed: "today I woke up with the knowledge that you are no more"[51]. Till this line, Ignat continues to appear in YOU's mind: in her recollections of their past encounters, in her fears for his life, and in the conversations she imagines they are holding about the war and about the role (so called) bad and good Russians play in it

> IGNAT
> It's not my place to give advice, but you write too much. Where things currently stand, non-Ukrainians are incapable even of writing a long post that won't be cursed. I'm just telling you how it is.
> Socrates knew that he knew nothing, and it didn't offend him, yet anyone with a Russian background as a rule (really!!) is certain that they know Ukrainians. That's very characteristic.
>
> IGNAT
> <your name> — <your pet name>, just live — that alone would mean so much to me. There's no need for all this. Everything you're doing is good, but it's not honest: you love both Kyiv and me, which means that what you say and feel isn't only for the sake of Ukraine.
> Now I'll say something offensive, but it's honest: this is not your war. [52]

YOU's realization of Ignat's death comes soon after this dialogue, which, to a certain degree, serves YOU as a permission to start grieving:

> YOU
> But you are no more. And that means I am no more too.
> Or maybe, on the contrary, on the contrary, on the contrary.
> Maybe for the first time ever — I am. Because I'm no longer afraid of hurting you. Of disappointing you by behaving like a Russian. […] Of not honoring your request, your request, your request that I just live.
> I'm no longer afraid of being in your way.
> Of making trouble for you.
> And that means I'm no longer afraid of anything — that was all that was left. [53]

In these lines, the historical catastrophe of the invasion crashes with the personal catastrophe of the major character. So, in the next and final scene numbered "0", the scene of dramaturgical rebut, YOU inverts the action. Infuriated by the Author's attempt to write a melodramatic finale with YOU returning to Russia to be

[51] Asya Voloshina, "CRIME/@AlwaysArmUkraine," translated by Ricardo Marin-Vidal, in *Critical Stages*, 2022 (26), [online]. https://www.critical-stages.org/26/crime-alwaysarmukraine/ (accessed December 16, 2023), p. 139.
[52] *Ibidem*, pp. 137-138.
[53] *Ibidem*, p. 140.

detained for extremism[54], YOU rebels against the logic of reader's empathy and compassion for the tragic protagonist, that makes the basis of tragedy. YOU reminds the Author that her authorial task is not to draw compassion for the character, the Author's "goal is to elicit compassion for something else" [55]:

> YOU
> From the start you knew that it was imperative not to elicit compassion for me, a little Russian in "exile" with a martyr complex. Not for this eye that cries, but for everything that this eye sees, for everything it's capable of seeing.
> Through its little scratched-up screen.
> You know I'm right. But you didn't come up with how to solve that problem. How to remove the stand-in you yourself created.[56]

Much like the six angry characters from Pirandello's famous play, YOU of *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine* takes the fate of the dramatic conflict and her story in her own hands. "I came up with a better ending," YOU declares[57]. "My ending is genuinely scary and revolting. And the focus will shift from me to the place where it belongs. I'll carry out the greatest suicide a character can commit in the name of embodying the author's intention." [58] With these lines YOU exits the fictional reality of the play, she steps in the reality off-stage, next to the audience members:

> I'm doing this not before the people in the world of the play — I'm doing it right here and now in front of you. For you. To kill myself for you. To shift the focus of your gaze. The focus. I'm breaking the fourth wall. Picture this: I walk down to the front of the stage, step down into the auditorium and sit on an audience member's lap, just as you might see in a brothel. Would you like that? Would you like me to trespass your personal boundaries? I remove that audience member's glasses and knock on their skull. On their skull, inside of which all the meaning making takes place. I then fold up and vomit, straight up vomit. And I slither away. Watch the war, watch the war, watch the war. Don't look away from it.[59]

This is the new Antigone of the theatre of catastrophe – ready to kill herself for the dramaturgical truth of the new tragedy as catastrophe. YOU's task is to move the audience's empathy away from herself as a tragic character, so to focus our attention on Ukraine. YOU's next Facebook posting is a feverish monologue of the blessing of three Putins[60], which leads to her deciding step. As a kind of dark Phenix, YOU commits an act of self-destruction and re-emerges as UOY, a pro-Russian Facebook avatar, the antipode of her own self.

> UOY
> And I woke up a different person.

[54] *Ibidem*, p. 143.
[55] *Ibidem*, p. 144.
[56] *Ibidem*, p. 144.
[57] *Ibidem*, p. 145.
[58] *Ibidem*, p. 145.
[59] *Ibidem*, p. 145.
[60] *Ibidem*, p. 146.

> UOY
> For the first time in the past six months, and maybe in my whole life, I felt… radiant joy. I guess it's important to choose the right side after all!
>
> UOY: NEW FACEBOOK PROFILE PICTURE
> Your picture framed in a Russian flag.
>
> UOY: NEW FACEBOOK BIO
> RuZZia is love.[61]

This change frustrates the audience and even makes them angry, because through YOU's self-destruction Esther Bol denies them a chance for recognition and identification with the character. To Esther Bol, YOU's suicide and then rebirth as her own opposite – a supporter of Putin's regime - serves as a slap in the face of her (mostly Russian speaking) audience. The artist takes away the pleasure of catharsis, which also serves her audience as a promise of forgiveness and forget-ness. Instead, Bol offers a *dark catharsis*: as an alternative of feeling solidarity with the tragic character, the audience must feel disappointment, anger, and hostility toward YOU, so their gaze would shift from YOU to Ukraine. To Esther Bol, even if YOU is compassionate for Ukraine, because she is from Russia - a representative of an imperial culture, the culture of the aggressor – in the eyes of the Ukrainians she has no right for forgiveness or for expressing her compassion. "My personal position is absolutely pro-Ukrainian, and so is the protagonist's," Esther Bol says; but Ukraine 'does not need [our] "deep empathy," and so we – the good Russians – must ask "Where should we put our deep empathy? Does your compassion change anything?," and "How to redeem an unredeemable guilt?' "[62]

To summarize: in *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine*, an act of dramaturgical inversion takes place. YOU is not the real protagonist of this play. Palimpsest of voices, in which YOU is immersed, stands for people, who during the act of performance take on the role of the protagonist. Like in Brecht's theatre, after YOU commits a suicide, the lights go up in the auditorium, the time of the fiction stops, and the people (the audience members) are forced to look at each other. This is the moment when the "dramaturgy of the spectator" is activated, and the new theatre of *political tragedy* begins[63]. The power of this theatre is rooted in the act of *interruption* – "an interrupted aesthetic experience" of the spectator[64] - as a condition of one's political activity and consciousness. On the one hand, Lehmann argues, makers of the political tragedy "have to maintain the interruption, the caesura of the aesthetic contemplative mode in theatre" [65]; on the other hand, they need to remember that "the Brechtian answer of presenting the political problem in epic distance to an audience is no longer

[61] *Ibidem*, p. 146.
[62] Asya Voloshina, "Personal Correspondence," *op. cit*.
[63] Hans-Thies Lehmann, "A Future for Tragedy. Remarks on the Political and Postdramatic," in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance,* edited by Carroll, Jerome, et al., London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 89.
[64] *Ibidem*, p. 107.
[65] *Ibidem*.

sufficient, even if it presents the insight into our lack of insight rather than a didactic message". [66]

IMAGES 9 and 10 – *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine,* Meet Factory Theatre, Prague, 2023, Director Tomáš Soldán, Photo: Andrea Cherna.

Much of contemporary political theatre is "a theatre of situation": it provides space for the politically engaged artists to "seek ways of creating a meeting point and conflict between aesthetic contemplation and its caesura by the intervention of social

[66] *Ibidem*, p. 108.

reality" [67]. In Esther Bol's play, this is exactly what transpires: first, the audience is called to witness the catastrophe reenacted for them on stage, then it is invited to identify and sympathize with the protagonist. Yet, when YOU commits a suicide and emerges in the body of a new pro-Putin avatar, the audience is confronted with the interruption – it is that caesura in their aesthetic experience that takes place because of "the intervention of social reality"[68]. At this moment – when Esther Bol denies her audience satisfaction of recognition and reversal – she invites them to take on the functions of the tragic Chorus. Yet, "there is no performance, no theatre, no acting out of a dramatic story. But there is the audience – our voices in the public space, our silence, our listening, our common moment of 'Eingedenken' (remembering)" [69]. As this ending demonstrates, theatre of catastrophe – its dark catharsis - lies not with the quest for the new aesthetic forms but with such performative practices that can "undermine our melodramatic way of perception" and seek forms of tragedy that "make reality impossible" [70]

Today's tragedy, Lehmann explains, must be irrevocably political, as it is tightly connected to Hegel's view of tragedy placed "at the borderline between Greek polis and the more modern world of the Roman empire and the Roman idea of the law, of a legal system" [71]. In increasingly multicultural society, which is heavily dependent on sensationalism and spectacle, tragic transgression is often conditioned not by the action presented on stage but by the labour of the audience:

> Tragic experience is bound to a process where we are taken to the edge of normative and conceptual self-assurance, and this process cannot be achieved by purely theoretical subversion but by the uncanny mental and physical experience of entering the twilight zone, where the sustainability of cultural norms which we adhere to is put into doubt. This, however, can also be said about the dimension of the political where the latter is understood in the sense of questioning the fundamental structures of our being together in a *polis*, rather than taking positions on concrete political issues.[72]

Friends' voices, news media, social-media postings, personal emails that make up the informational background of YOU's story constitute the fictionalized Chorus of Bol's play. The dialogue can be named *conceptually choral* – a term coined by Martin Revermann in his analysis of Brechtian dramaturgy, in which the playwright engages a "collective wisdom, collective experience, and collective authority" with high self-reflexivity[73]. Yet, Esther Bol positions her audience as

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[67] *Ibidem*.
[68] *Ibidem.*
[69] *Ibidem*, p. 89.
[70] Muller in Hans-Thies Lehmann, "A Future for Tragedy. Remarks on the Political and Postdramatic," in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance,* edited by Carroll, Jerome, et al., London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 109.
[71] *Ibidem*, p. 96.
[72] *Ibidem*, p. 99.
[73] Martin Revermann, "Brechtian Chorality," in *Choruses Ancient and Modern*, edited by Joshua Billings, Felix Budelmann, and Fiona Macintosh, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 153.

reluctant members of this Chorus and thus as a counterpart character to the play's protagonist YOU. By inserting such stage direction "<insert your name>", Bol invites her readers to imagine themselves interacting with YOU through social media, thus turning this reader into an active agent of the action. Such stage directions as "Pipe down, <@yourname>. Would you like me to tell you what will happen in the near future?" and "Alas, <@yourname>, judging others based on yourself is foolish,"[74], further implicate individual readers into the making of the play, and so Bol creates *a conceptual chorus* of global citizens, equally implicated both into the war on Ukraine and into the larger issues of government censorship, totalitarianism, morality, and communal responsibility. The play mobilizes questions of the relationship between an individual and a community within a global society. Bol demands that her audience reflects on their role within the global community and, even further, on the accuracy of the term 'global community' when the war catastrophes persist. The play exhibits elements of *choral or collective mourning*[75], with the choir of internet voices acting as a vehicle of peoples' collective sense of being lost, their anger and frustration with the authorities but also with each other. Standing in for the audience's experiences, this fictionalized Chorus serves as a call to action, an indication of how one should be processing the catastrophic events they are witnessing. This is an act of mourning – but not necessarily of the loss of individual lives, rather of the circumstances that led to this tragedy. Yet, when YOU perishes this fictionalized Chorus perishes too: it metamorphizes into "us" – its own spectators – who now must take on a responsibility of making political tragedy today:

> Tragedy may come about in such artistic practices which, on the one hand, imply a clear consciousness of the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, but on the other hand find it difficult to remain within it, and seek ways not to dissolve but to interrupt this autonomy. What then happens is this: it becomes possible to re-invest the sphere of the real into the aesthetic domain which systematically is defined precisely by the exclusion of the real. Ethico-political responsibility re-enters into the aesthetic experience.[76]

Questions of irredeemable guilt, however, continue to drive Esther Bol's work forward: to Kierkegaard, she writes, this sense of guilt "is lost in contemporary tragedy. So, protagonists carry individual, subjective guilt. But this kind of guilt is incommensurate with the substantial, epic, inherited guilt of real classical tragedy," which reduces the value of tragedy, in the time of the catastrophe[77].

Conclusion

Esther Bol left Russia in March 2022 in the gesture of anti-war protest and in solidarity with Ukraine. Since that time, she has been constantly and steadily working

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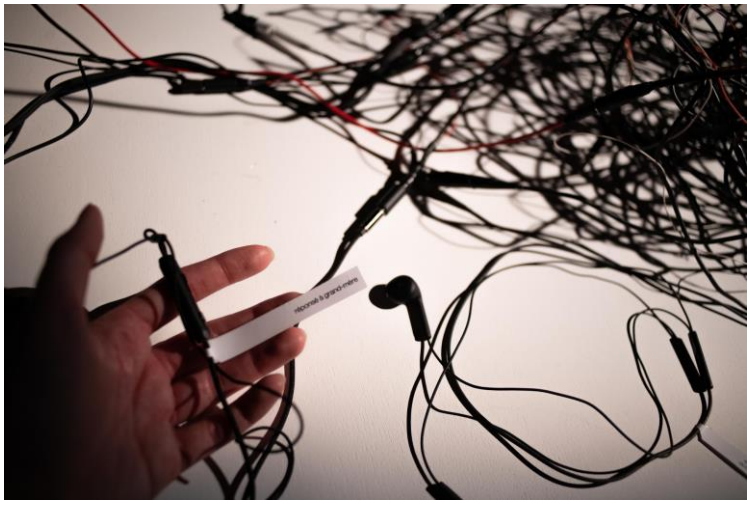
[74] Asya Voloshina, "CRIME/@AlwaysArmUkraine", translated by Ricardo Marin-Vidal, in *Critical Stages*, 2022 (26), [online]. https://www.critical-stages.org/26/crime-alwaysarmukraine/ (accessed December 16, 2023), p. 45.

[75] Hans-Thies Lehmann and Erik Butler, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre,* London, Routledge, 2016, p. 400.

[76] Hans-Thies Lehmann, "A Future for Tragedy. Remarks on the Political and Postdramatic," in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance,* edited by Carroll, Jerome, et al., London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 100.

[77] Asya Voloshina, "Personal Correspondence," *op. cit*.

toward the Ukrainian cause, both as an artist and as a political activist, including her financial help to the Ukrainian army. Bol's anti-war position resulted in Russian government's ban on her productions in the country, public ostracism in the state-sponsored and social media, and loss of family ties. Yet, what constituted the writer's activism in Russia, now has turned into a full-scale protest based on Esther Bol's clear realization that while this regime lasts, there will be no possibility of going back home.



IMAGES 11 and 12 – *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine*. Le musée des histoires (non) imaginées, Producers and curators Artem Arsenyan and Nika Porkhomovskaya; Lyon, October 2023, Photo: Anastasia Korostelkina.

Transforming *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine* from just a dramatic text geared toward a theatrical production into a type of performance art can be recognized as Esther Bol's attempt to reveal power of a tragic transgression that this text can offer. The first staged reading of *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine* took place in October 2022 (directed by Semyon Alexandrovsky) in Tel Aviv. Its first full-scale production opened

in March 2023 at the Meet Factory Theatre, in Prague (translated by Marina Feltlová and directed by Tomáš Soldán), with all proceeds from this event to be donated to the Ukrainian Embassy in Prague to support the Ukrainian army. In October 2023, Esther Bol participated in an interactive performance installation *Musée des histoires (non) imaginées* presented by Théâtre Nouvelle Génération in Lyon, in partnership with the anti-war platform Resistance Theatre.

Curated by a theatre producer Artem Arsenian and a theatre researcher Nika Parkhomovskaya, this installation offered its artists-participants, including Esther Bol, a chance to respond to the question: What do Russian theatre artists in exile feel when their native country attacks another? 'Pain, fear, despair, shame, guilt. The spectrum of emotions is wide, but for many their consequence is unequivocal: the only possible decision is to leave one's country in order not to be an accomplice to the crime, to keep talking, to create another future, an alternative future" (Note of Intent). As the result, the works selected for this installation served as the artists' collective act of r e s i s t a n c e t o B a l k a n i s m , w a r , a n d

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LIST OF IMAGES

IMAGE 1 – Esther Bol. Personal photo.
IMAGE 2 – IMAGE 3 – Antigone/Reduction. New Stage Workshop, Alexandrinsky Teatr, St. Petersburg, 2014. Director Anfisa Ivanova. Photo: Tatiana Tumanova.
IMAGE 4 – Antigone: Reduction, Masterskaya Sovremennogo Teatra, St. Petersburg, 2020. Director Maria Galyazimova. Photo: Dmitry Yakubov.
IMAGE 5 – The Chorus Perishes, Fulcro Theatre, Director Daria Shanina, Photo: Alexander Khanin.
IMAGE 6, 7 and 8 – *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine*, The Lubimovka Echo Festival, Director Anastasia Patlay, Belgrade December 16-18, 2022. Photo: Nata Korenovskaia.
IMAGE 9 and 10 – *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine,* Meet Factory Theatre, Prague, 2023, Director Tomáš Soldán, Photo: Andrea Cherna.
IMAGE 11 and 12 – *Crime/#AlwaysArmUkraine*, Le musée des histoires (non) imaginées, Producers and curators Artem Arsenyan and Nika Porkhomovskaya; Lyon, October 2023, Photo: Anastasia Korostelkina.