

# Ukrainian Modernist Drama in the European Context

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**Abstract** The article aims at comparing the main characteristics of Ukrainian modernist drama to European dramatic models from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The methodology of the research is based on comparative-typological, genealogical, and cultural-historical methods, which enabled us to define the foundations for the development of modernist theatre in Ukraine, as well as identify its general and unique characteristics. In the research, we show that despite the unfavorable conditions for the development of national culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the main stages of Ukrainian modernist drama resonate with European dramatic evolution, from variations of the “new drama” (late nineteenth century) to avant-garde experiments in the 1910s and 1920s. The typological connection of the plays of Ukrainian early modernist writers (Lesia Ukrainka, O. Oles, S. Cherkasenko) with the genre paradigm of the “new drama,” as constituted in the works of H. Ibsen, A. Strindberg, M. Maeterlinck, W. Yeats, and others, is established. In the first decades of the twentieth century, a younger generation of Ukrainian playwrights got involved in literary life and exhibited a stronger interest in formal experimentation. In their search for a way to depict the socio-political difficulties of the moment, V.Vynnychenko, M. Irchan, Ja. Mamontov, I. Dniprovsky, and M. Kulish turned to German Expressionist “drama of the cry” approaches. The works of L. Kurbas and M. Kulish, whose efforts are regarded as the pinnacle of the Ukrainian avant-garde activity of the interwar period, get special attention.

**Keywords** new drama; comparison; similarity; transformation; avant-garde; expressionism; technique

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## Introduction

Since Ukraine's independence in 1991, there has been a major change in the study of modernistic trends in Ukrainian art and literature. Since then, researchers have made significant progress in the revival of national culture including theatre and drama as its core elements. On the one hand, they attempted to give a comprehensive analysis of Ukrainian theatre at the time (M. Kudriavtsev, N. Maliutina, A. Matiushchenko, R. Parkhomyk, T. Sverbilova), while on the other hand, certain efforts were made to investigate national dramatic art in the context of the European "new drama" (I. Baranova, O. Blashkiv, M. Korenevych, S. Khorob). However, the majority of studies on the issue characterize Ukrainian modernist drama fragmentary, concentrating on the creative activity of single playwrights. There is a current need for a careful investigation of the evolution of Ukrainian modernist drama in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as its interactions with European theatre in the period. In this regard, the play provides a framework for a dynamic view of society that extends well beyond standard literary concepts.

The analysis of specific and common aspects of Ukrainian modernist theatre demands the clarification of the research methodology. We employed comparative-typological, genealogical, and cultural-historical approaches to outline the historical and cultural foundation for the formation of modernist theatre in Ukraine, as well as to establish its general and unique traits in comparison to the dramatic models of European playwrights. In the essay, we rely on the theory of commonalities, which is based on comparable cultural and historical circumstances rather than direct or indirect relationships. In his work "On the Theory of Comparative Studies" (2006), Kaspersky outlines three planes of comparison, each of which uses its own logic. The first specializes in comparing literary phenomena that are distant in time, the second deals with pieces of literature that are distant in space, and the third one deals with semiotically different discourses and forms of culture. According to this theory, our study belongs to the second category of comparisons, the essential feature of which is the overcoming of spatial distances, as well as the alienation of individual cultures and literatures and "the search for their structural

correspondences” (533–534). We also follow D. Diuryshyn’s conception of synchronistic typology (1979), by which an important condition for the validity of comparative studies is the systematic coverage of all typological relations at the level of ideological and thematic proximity, socio-cultural and philosophical views, psychologically conditioned analogies, etc.

The abovementioned approaches encouraged us to search for a certain basis, an invariant, as a cross-cutting model of a dramatic work. V. Budnyi and M. Ilnytskyi (2008) characterize the concept of genre as a moving category, which is aimed at “set, repetitive, recognizable types of literary structures” (193). At the same time, R. Heibullaieva (2012) introduces the concept of genre genotype—a set of distinguishing features that are common to works of a particular genre. The study of general models will help to reveal the way of producing new artistic texts, and hence, will allow tracing “how certain cultural and historical features are reflected in works of art” (342).

The important components of the methodological basis of this article are the works by M. Kudriavtsev (1997), S. Khorob (2002), T. Sverbilova (2009), and A. Billa (2004) which illuminates some aspects of the theoretical and historical-comparative development of the drama at the turn of the twentieth century.

To successfully reveal the topic of the article, the following objectives are outlined: to prove the one-stage development of Ukrainian and Western European drama at the turn of the twentieth century; to show the common and unique characteristics of the Ukrainian modernist drama of the time; to trace the transformation of the “new drama” into avant-garde dramatic forms in the first decades of the twentieth century.

### **Tendencies of Early Modernism in Ukrainian Drama at the Turn of the Twentieth Century**

The shift towards the renewal of traditional forms of dramatic art, observed at the turn of the twentieth century, took place in the Ukrainian drama due to the modernist trends, including the “new dramatic” revolution of the West European theatre. Despite the political oppression of Ukraine by tsarist Russia, the new literary tendencies, spread in the 1890s, were marked by intensity and versatility. The survey of the dramatic heritage of Ivan Franko, Lesia Ukrainka, Oleksandr Oles, Spyrydon Cherkasenko, and others, proved the typological similarity of the artistic structure of their works with the modern drama of H. Ibsen, A. Strindberg, M. Maeterlinck, W. B. Yeats, H. Hauptmann. Among the most important common characteristics

of Ukrainian and European dramas are, for example, the conflict between man and society, analytic plot structure, open ending, allegorical imagery, deep symbolism, wide use of silence (laughing), psycho- and self-analysis, and so on.

To begin with, we should trace the precondition of the formation of the modernist drama in Ukrainian literature. Some traits of the genre “new drama” can be observed in Ivan Franko’s (1856–1916) plays. Actually, he was the first who dared to deny the purely entertaining function of the dramatic art, insisting on the need to modernize the drama following European criteria. While studying at the University of Vienna, the Ukrainian writer had good opportunities to learn about modern literary tendencies, and that fact stimulated his own search. It is worth mentioning here Franko’s play *Ukradene shchastia* (1893) [*The Stolen Happiness*] which is suggested to be a national version of Ibsen’s *Doll’s House* (1879). First of all, Franko used Ibsen’s approach to the dramatic construction. We find in his work the traits typical for the Norwegian playwright’s model of drama, in particular, a retrospective-analytical composition, a tense plotline, a tragic open ending as the fate of the main character, etc. Like Ibsen, the Ukrainian author tried to represent social problems from the perspective of the tragedy of human’s existence. Enriching his works with psychological and philosophical issues, Franko offered a new fresh look at ordinary situations of everyday life, and it resonated with the visions of European masters of dramatic art.

However, most literary critics associate the development of a new drama in Ukraine with the works of Lesia Ukrainka (1871–1913), who is considered to be “the only Ukrainian playwright of the world level” (Sverbilova 152). Highly appreciating the innovations of Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Hauptmann, and other “new playwrights,” Lesia Ukrainka managed to create her personal writing style. In her own way, she reflected the motifs borrowed from world literature, at the same time significantly changed “the forms of presentation of these motifs” (Khorob 89). The key elements of the writer’s work include a clear concept of individuality, philosophical and psychological principles of the presentation of characters’ evolution, and modernist methods of ideological and aesthetic expression. The genre model of Lesia Ukrainka’s plays, as well as of the works of new playwrights, is based on a tense, internally concentrated plot line, which illuminates the struggle of ideas, and ends with catharsis (*Oderzhyma* (1901) [*Obsessed*], *Vavylonskyi polon* (1903) [*Captivity of Babylon*], or an open ending as it is traced in the dramas of the late period, for example in *Rufin i Prisculla* (1905) [*Rufin and Priscilla*], *Boiarynia* (1912) [*The Boyar woman*]). At the same time, the author gave priority to the intellectual game, which became the subject of explication of a certain idea. It should be also

underlined that Lesia Ukrainka's dramas, like those of European masters, did not provide ready-made solution, but, on the contrary, they were thought-provoking and debatable.

Lesia Ukrainka's innovations became a powerful source for the emergence of a young generation of playwrights. In this respect, Oleksandr Oles (1878–1944) is considered to be the most significant figure. He was one of the first Ukrainian dramatists who appealed to the principles of the poetics of symbolism. It is not surprising that he is often compared with Maeterlinck. Critics (S. Khorob, T. Sverbilova) emphasize the conflict between soul and body or the spiritual and material worlds as common to the works of both authors. In Oles' works, it became a form of protest against naturalism and ethnography inherent in the traditional realistic drama.

Like Maeterlinck, Oles achieves dramatic tension due to the internal collisions, which are transmitted through the use of colourful dance scenes, dialogues, and singing. Music, especially in the plays of the late period, becomes a full-fledged compositional element, a “formative factor at the compositional level” (Sverbilova 137). The dichotomy of the spiritual and psychological state of the hero is often expressed by employing the poetics of nightdream. Hence, the reader becomes both an observer and a judge at the same time. It is up to him to decide what sphere to choose—fantastic or real.

At the same time, in his later plays, Oles goes beyond symbolic poetics. In some texts, mainly *Po dorozh v kazku* (1908) [*On the Way to a Fairy Tale*] and *Dramatychni etudy* (1914) [*Dramatic Etudes*], we find the elements of the grotesque combination of high and low, order and chaos, peace and movement. In fact, the author provided a new approach to the dramatic representation of reality which will be inherent in the avant-garde drama of the first decades of the twentieth century. From this point of view, he may be regarded as one of the predecessors of the avant-garde drama in Ukraine.

### **Avant-garde Experiments of the Ukrainian Playwrights of the Interwar Period**

The significant impetus for qualitative changes and modernization of theatrical art in Ukraine were the events of the first decades of the twentieth century, in particular the Great War, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ukrainian Revolution, and its consequences. They contributed to the revival of national culture. With regard to the theatrical life of the time, two complementary trends are observed: on the one hand, we can see the intensification of activity of amateur and professional theatres, which tried to convey the average spectators' attention to the

traditional plays; on the other hand, the younger generation of dramatists showed great interest in the avant-garde trends (surrealism, expressionism, futurism, etc.), that spread throughout Europe at that time.

Most critics (Maliutina, Sverbilova, Khorob) suggest expressionism to have the greatest influence on the formation of the interwar Ukrainian drama. One cannot but agree with Khorob that it is the expressionists who became full-fledged creators of the dramatic and literary context of the twentieth century in Ukraine (271). In their works, the playwrights tried to show the contradictions between the new reality of the industrial world and the traditional Ukrainian peasant way of life. To realize their artistic intentions, the authors resorted to combining a detailed description of the characters and the dynamics of the plot with a psychological analysis of the nature of the personages' mood swings. This feature distinguished the plays of Ukrainian playwrights from the works of European authors. The national peculiarity of Ukrainian expressionism was that the peak of its development was in the 1920s, while in Europe it was gradually dying out then. This fact gave grounds to the Ukrainian playwrights to "organically infuriate in their work realism with naturalism, symbolism with expressionism" (Khorob 288). It is not about a direct imitation, but the creative rethinking of expressionist poetics, supplemented by the achievements of traditional Ukrainian drama.

The key representatives of the Ukrainian avant-garde theatre are V. Vynnychenko, Ja. Mamontov, I. Dniprovsky, L. Kurbas, and M. Kulish. The leader in this list is Vynnychenko (1880–1951), whose early creative pursuits were marked by an appeal to the genre of melodrama. This dramatic form allowed the author to combine 'forms of mass culture with current issues of modern history and culture' (Sverbilova 81). Vynnychenko transformed the artistic experience of Hamsun, Zola, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Andreiev. There are some links between Vynnychenko's drama *Pryhvozhdzheni* (1914) [*Nailed*] and H. Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881): both plays are characterized by internal conflicts with an emphasis on psychological mysteries and confusing moral issues. In general, the creative method of Vynnychenko is a mixture of different approaches and techniques, which testifies to his deep comprehension of modern philosophical and aesthetic ideas.

We cannot but mention here a significant impact of F. Nietzsche's philosophy on Vynnychenko's worldview as a writer. It is under the influence of the German thinker that a new type of literary heroes was formed, the so-called "new man"—a creative young intellectual who despises the crowd and tries to rise above a gloomy reality. The most valuable thing to him is the moral principle of honesty. But in the process of moral self-improvement, he realizes the irreconcilable "contradictions of

one's own nature and human nature in general" (Matiushchenko 120) which often leads to tragedy. After all, such a hero ruins not only his life but also the lives of others, as we can observe in the plays of B. Shaw and H. Hauptmann.

In the course of comparative analysis, we also drew parallels between Vynnychenko's and Strindberg's plays concerning their interpretation of time and space spheres. In the works of both authors, the events take place in real time, mostly in a family-friendly circle. This leads to narrowing or limitation of a living space. Common for the playwrights is the use of double reality (when the characters act on the stage of their own lives), as well as the cultivation of the motifs of suicide and of psychological experiments (*Shchabli zhyttia* (1907) [*Steps of Life*]), *Velykyi Molokh* (1920) [*Big Moloch*], *Zakon* (1924) [*Law*]). At the same time, as opposed to Strindberg, the personal happiness of Vynnychenko's protagonist very often depends on his political views, which are associated with the turbulent socio-political events in Ukraine of that time (Vynnychenko himself was directly involved in them). For example, the play *Mizh Dvokh Syl* (1918) [*Between Two Forces*] depicts the situation when the family is divided into representatives of enemy forces. Thus, a separate family serves as a model to illustrate the struggle of supporters and opponents of the national independence of Ukraine. The retrospective-analytical composition, inherited from Ibsen, allows to reveal the hidden motifs of behavior of the characters as a consequence of their past. The deep psychological insight, applied by the author, makes for the portrayal of moral confusion in the heroes' souls. The plot of the play is sharply dynamic, the characters are active and effective, but, according to the avant-garde poetics, they are presented as the mere spokesmen of political slogans. Expressing their own views, they often use in their speeches rally phrases, short sentences with imperative components and rhetorical questions.

In the early 1920s, Vynnychenko's manner of writing drama was successfully followed by his younger colleagues, namely Yakiv Mamontov (1888–1940), Ivan Dniprovsky (1895–1934), Myroslav Irchan (1897–1937). However, in their plays, they showed a growing interest in formal experimentation. In particular, Mamontov combined conventionality and symbolism with expressionistic imagery based on visual realities. Notable in this regard is the play *Velykyi Ham* (1921) [*The Great Ham*], referred by Sverbilova to the drama of "living symbols," where each of the characters "presents a certain civic position" (203). Unfortunately, Mamontov's modernistic search, as well as of other playwrights, namely Dniprovsky, was interrupted in the mid-1920s, when both of them embarked on a path of compromise with the ideological prerogatives of the time. For example, in the expressionistic

play *Joho Vlasnist* (1929) [*His Property*] Mamontov touched the problem of the formation of a new man, depicting the characters against the background of socialist reality. A new person in the author's interpretation is the proletarian—a quarry engineer who is committed to communist ideals and dedicates his life to building a “bright future.”

As for Irchan, his dramatic work is a vivid example of the transformation of Expressionist play on a national basis. In his efforts to represent sharp contradictions of the day, he shows the struggle of a “little man” with the machine called “industrial progress.” In the play *Rodyna Shchitkariv* (1924) [*The Brushes Family*], which has been translated into twenty languages and was often staged abroad, the author raised the issue of social inequality. It is conveyed through the struggle between capitalists, who chase after profits, and workers as victims of their employers. Despite the grotesqueness of the characters, they are alive and full-blooded. Significant is the scene, when the only sighted son in the family of the blind, while taking part in the war, loses his ability to see because of poisonous gases. One can recognize here the typological similarity with analogous topics in *Gas I* and *Gas II* by G. Kaiser, which enjoyed great popularity in our country.

In this respect, the activity of the Kharkiv Theatre “Berezil” (1922–1933), headed by Les Kurbas (1887–1937), is noteworthy. According to Anna Bila, the methodology of the young director was the formula “from psychologism through transformed psychologism to civic expediency and a new person” (286). Kurbas was educated at the University of Vienna, hence, he was well acquainted with the preferences of European playgoers, in particular, the experiments of the Austrian director M. Reinhardt. Thus, in the article *Nova Nimetska Drama* (1919) [*New German Drama*], expressing a deep admiration for German creative youth (“strong with muscles, with high culture, with high intelligence” (34)), Kurbas insisted on the affinity of the Ukrainian and German literary intellectuals, hoping for an imminent cultural explosion in Ukraine. Highly appreciating the German “drama of the cry,” the Ukrainian artist emphasized its ideological and aesthetic potential.

Kurbas saw the main purpose of theatres in the protest against the “bloodlessness of old traditions, without courage and temperament.” He insisted on the need to create a theatre of influence. Declaring his visions, in the letter to the troupe of the “Young Theatre,” Kurbas wrote: “I see the theatre of the future as the theatre of stage images, where the director will be a playwright who will give the script of the play” (Kurbas 144). The artist paid special attention to the director's independence from a playwright's creative idea. According to his beliefs, drama should become “the material for the theatre, for its entertainment effects, for



wielding the masses, for light and colour effects” (Kurbas 538). However, Kurbas gave the main place to the actor, who must “constantly develop his means,” so that his individuality “could freely express himself” on the stage without the help of others (539).

The director managed to create a theatre of accentuated influence, which was based on the active position of the audience. During the first season, the theatre successfully staged the plays *Bila Pantera i Chornyi Vedmid* [*Black Panther and White Bear*] by Vynnychenko and *Dramatychni Etiudy* [*Dramatic Etudes*] by Oles. Reforming the theatre on the European model, he adapted mimetic realistic drama to the needs of modern directing and tried to convey the action on stage to the audience as accurately as possible. Therefore, the actors usually played on the average stage. There were even cases when the performances were staged on a truck in the middle of a residential area, and this practice was quite common among German expressionists.

In contrast to academicism illiteracy and narrow individualism, Kurbas proclaimed movement, variability, and instability. In the performances, he very often used the principle of contrast between light and shadows. Thanks to his musical education, Kurbas was able to experiment with the musical-spatial dimensions of the play. This helped him to achieve the rhythmic unity of musical and dramatic components. The musical sphere of the play, according to the director, usually illustrated the complex psychological subtext of the drama. While preparing for the performance, he paid great attention to articulation and speech technique. For this reason, special classes were organized for actors. These principles were not completely new, they worked successfully on the European stage, but for the Ukrainian theatre, their introduction can be considered as really revolutionary.

The performance of the play *Gas* by the German expressionist Kaiser (in April 1923) was an undoubted success. Its main purpose, according to Kurbas, was “to show the moment in its pure form without any stylization” (571). For this reason, complex techniques were used on the stage. In order to convey the process of man’s transformation into an automatic performer of social functions, Kurbas created a complex rhythmic plastic composition of actors, and the final gas explosion was transmitted through a pyramid-like composition of human bodies. The director himself characterized his method as “expressive realism, based on active worldview” (Kurbas 45).

In the work “Les Kurbas: Rehearsal of the Future” (1998), N. Korniienko underlines the typological affinity of the Ukrainian director’s approach and the techniques of the German playwright B. Brecht. According to the scholar, it is the

Ukrainian who was the first to use the technique of “alienation,” though the German playwright is considered to be its author. Regarding this concept in a broader semantic field, the Ukrainian director managed to create “not only a new actor, but also a new person” (241). It is generally agreed today that Kurbas’ “Berezil,” preserving its individual features, developed in parallel with leading European theatres of the time. By abandoning provincial stamps and updating the repertoire and principles of staging, the Ukrainian theatre director raised the performing arts to a qualitatively new level.

Kurbas’ activity became an impulse for the spread of modern approaches to dramatic art. A lot of new writers, actors, playwrights entered the literary life, contributing to the renewal of national drama. Among them, a special significance is given to the activity of Mykola Kulish (1892–1937). The acquaintance with Kurbas in 1925 in the intellectual and artistic atmosphere of Kharkiv (the city that was the capital of Ukraine at that time) had the most tangible influence on the formation of aesthetic views of Kulish as a playwright, and above all, contributed to his orientation to a West European drama. Ja. Holoborodko points out some contradictions of these two creative personalities, in particular their different origins and upbringing (Kurbas came from a family of Galician intellectuals, was educated at the University of Vienna; Kulish, on the contrary, was from a peasant family, studied at a provincial town school, was mobilized and took part in the war). At the same time, the researcher admits that it was “a meeting of two talents who cared about the problems of the scene” (Holoborodko 35). The aura of the picturesque Ukrainian village, where the writer spent his childhood, did not contradict his innovative ambitions, but, on the contrary, added uniqueness and originality to his plays. Analyzing the creative tandem of Kulish-Kurbas, N. Miroshnychenko denies the dominant role of one of them. We agree with the researcher’s statement about initial openness of Kurbas and Kulish to dialogue, as well as their mutual desire to find new forms, and create a new type of art focused on national culture.

It’s worth noting that Kulish’s creative method is based on an organic blending of old and modern means and devices, rather than a complete rejection of classic forms. That approach laid the foundation for the creation of new models of artistic reality. The writer’s work contains the deep psychology and intellectualism of Lesia Ukrainka’s tragedies, V. Vynnychenko’s European worldview, and the symbolic imagery of Oles’ plays. In this regard, A. Matiushchenko claims that the tragedy of Malakhii from *Narodnyi Malakhii* (1927) [*People’s Malakhii*] is a kind of modification of previous versions, but in the new social conditions. It is thanks to this approach that the writer achieved high skill in the dramatic art, and it can be

compared with the best examples of European plays. This is notably true of the play “97,” (ed. in 1924), which was recognized as the first professional drama not only in Ukraine but also across the Soviet Union. On the one hand, it deepens the traditions of psychological theatre, on the other—shows a new type of hero who dies for a dubious idea. The author himself characterized his play as “drawings of rural life in times of unbearable famine and revolutionary everyday life” (Kulish 440), however, we see that it lacks the revolutionary pathos and opposite slogans inherent in the previous models. The way of life of the village, once sung and dreamed of by romantics, acquires a tragicomic character and is demonstrated at the stage of slow extinction. The internal structure of the play is kept “on the nerves,” which is an indisputable feature of the avant-garde writing of the twentieth century. The first drama clearly outlined the author’s tendency to destroy the “dogmatic concept of historical and socialist optimism of a new man’s worldview” (Sverbilova 199). It should be noted that with each subsequent work, this feature became more noticeable.

Actually, the social conflict is the core point of Kulish’s dramas. However, with the development of the action, it grows into an eternal philosophical confrontation of the individual “I” with the outside world. The main goal of the writer is not the record of reality, but the process of its experience. Hence, depicting character’s mood swings which depend on the environment, he primarily focuses on his mental fluctuations and intellectual pursuits. We agree with Khorob’s viewpoint that Kulish associatively paved the way from “the mental state of the hero to social phenomena and facts” (348). That is, through the collision of the “little man” the author reveals the crisis of the human personality in general.

In order to expand the semantic capacity of the text, the playwright resorts to complex techniques and means, including the poetics of daydreaming, grotesque generalizations, Christian-religious symbolism, fragmentary dialogues, and dialogues-confessions. It is through dialogues that the effect of a communicative gap is achieved when the characters speak but do not hear each other. Thus, the impression of illogicality, and even the unnecessary of “talking” is formed: no one hears you anyway.

The characters of the plays are marked by bifurcation or even disruption of consciousness due to the choice they have to make in complex external conflicts, finding themselves at the epicenter of the socio-historical storm. The protagonist loses not only personal but also national self-identification under the pressure of the established social-totalitarian system. His protest goes beyond the internal framework, growing into the cry of the soul against human depersonalization,

violence against the uniqueness of man. The state of confusion, experienced by characters, conveys a complex range of the author's feelings as well. No wonder, most of plays have several versions of the ending, which, according to Matiushchenko, testifies to the "tragic spiritual rupture of the artist" (90). It is noteworthy that many of the author's sharply critical thoughts are verbalized primarily by negative characters, which made it possible to circumvent censorship and thus convey their opinion to the reader. Relevant in this context was the introduction of elements of the mask and the technique of alienation, embodied, in particular, in the image of Malakhii. The madness of the character creates a situation of alienation; hence the reality appears before the audience in its imperfection. Thus, the author managed to create a semi-fantastic world, recreated by Malakhii's consciousness.

The performance of this play was far too innovative. Thanks to Kurbas' ideas, it was staged in the expressionist manner. It was the director who came up with the idea to dress the mad Malakhii in a robe, which together with the bulky furniture of the apartment symbolized the dominance of routine over man. In addition, on the initiative of Kurbas, a reformist machine was brought to the stage. It consisted of various tools, including a plow, and tractor wheels, where Malakhii threw the people he wanted to reform. When the machine started working, smoke billowed from it, and then angels flew out with pink wings and hearts on their backs. In the play, the metaphysical combination of everyday authenticity coexists with romance and farce, creating a situation of grotesqueness.

Despite the obvious success of the play *Narodnyi Malakhii* [*People's Malakhii*], the reviews were mostly negative. Kurbas was very persistent in his defense of the play. He argued that "the audience has forgotten to treat the performance actively, and gradually begins to forget that one must use the brain in the theatre" (721). In this regard, the director insisted on a special role of the theatre that should excite the audience, ask unpleasant questions, rather than perform obvious facts. Kurbas' visions differed from the concept of Soviet art of the late 1920s, aimed at forming a new type of literature. The latter was to be grounded and understood by millions of workers and peasants. In order to strengthen power control in the field of literature, a number of organizations (Holovlit, Holovrepertkom, All-Ukrainian Theatre Committee) were created, which had an exclusive right to ban the play before the show if it could somehow harm public morals. That is how the play *People's Malakhii* caught the eye of censors. In fact, its performance started the persecution of the Berezil Theatre, in particular of Kurbas and Kulish as its key figures. In the future, the forced imposition of the method of so-called socialist realism led to a

significant aggravation of relations between Ukrainian modernist artists and the Bolshevik government, and hence, to the decline of the national idea till its renewal at the end of the twentieth century.

### Conclusion

The development of Ukrainian modernist theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has gone through several stages, beginning with Ivan Franko's plays and ending with interwar avant-garde theatre. Franko's efforts to modernize traditional drama laid the ground for the activities of the playwrights, who resorted to a widespread cultivation of the "new drama" techniques and devices. The study proved the typological affinity of the works by Lesia Ukrainka, S. Cherkasenko, and O. Oles with the genre model of the "new drama," represented by H. Ibsen, A. Strindberg, M. Maeterlinck, H. Hauptmann, and others. Among the common characteristics, we have distinguished the conflict between man and society, analytical plot structure, open ending, allegorical imagery, deep symbolism, psycho-, and self-analysis, etc. The next stage of the modernist drama's development is connected with the creativity of the younger generation of dramatists (V. Vynnychenko, M. Irchan, Ja. Mamontov, I. Dniprovskiy, M. Kulish), who entered the literary life of Ukraine in the first decades of the twentieth century. In their plays, we traced parallels with German Expressionist drama marked by abrupt plot development, artistic conventionality, emphasized-schematic imagery, poetics of contrast, grotesqueness, etc. The activity of L. Kurbas and M. Kulish is regarded as the culmination of the Ukrainian avant-garde drama. By blending the latest approaches to the artistic portrayal of reality with components of classical theatre, they brought the national dramatic art to the European level.

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