Integrating Tragedy and Trauma:
Thy Word Be Done as a Model of Post-Traumatic Dramaturgy

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Abstract

This thesis presents an original post-traumatic play, *Thy Word Be Done*, developed through a research-creation methodology that investigates how theatre can represent experiences of war trauma and pathways of psychological and spiritual recovery. The project draws on diverse Ukrainian documentary sources—including real-time combat video recordings, interviews with injured Ukrainian soldiers, medical professionals, and civilians, as well as contemporary media accounts—to construct a text that interweaves authentic verbatim language with original, poetically crafted writing within a merged dramatic structure.

The fabric of the play draws on four sources: classical tragedy, mystery plays, the hero's journey, and psychological models of trauma recovery. By placing these structures side by side, the work reflects both the shattering effects of trauma and the possibility for a person to recover and find a new way forward.

This thesis argues that the contemporary post-traumatic play, by integrating classical dramatic narrative models with functional models of trauma recovery, and, for factual authenticity, bringing together voices from the Ukrainian battlefield, rehabilitation, and media, can embody both testimony and transformation, offering audiences a means to witness trauma while also engaging with resilience and hope.

Dedication

For the defenders of Ukraine — known and unknown — who gave their lives and health for its freedom, its children, its land, and its future yet to come.

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Introduction

Context and Problem Statement

War always leaves behind not only destroyed cities, but also ruined destinies. The current Russian-Ukrainian war has become a catastrophe for Ukraine and its people, whose lives have been irreversibly changed. In addition to numerous victims and massive destruction, one of the most severe consequences has been the disability of soldiers and civilians, such as amputations, blindness, and other heavy physical injuries and psychological traumas that lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Recovery from PTSD, in many cases, is complicated by the profound social isolation of victims. As Judith L. Herman, one of the leading American psychiatrists focused on the understanding and treatment of trauma, emphasizes, society is often unable to hear or acknowledge the fate of victims of violence: “Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma. It is difficult for an observer to remain clearheaded and calm, to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces, and to fit them together. It is even more difficult to find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen. Those who attempt to describe the atrocities that they have witnessed also risk their own credibility. To speak publicly about one’s knowledge of atrocities is to invite the stigma that attaches to victims.” (Herman 2). This means that the rehabilitation process is impossible without social recognition, without the experience of the traumatized being heard.

This research project was born out of a paradox: on the one hand, there is an urgent need to speak about war trauma and disability; on the other, the language of trauma often fails to

translate for those who have not lived it. I am a trained Gestalt therapist in supervised practice. I have completed my formal training in Kyiv Gestalt University and currently work with clients impacted by war-related trauma, including bereavement, forced displacement, loss of safety and home, and the psychological sequelae of major health changes. I encountered this problem personally: after losing my home, after my mother's death, after being forced into exile, and working with photo and video evidence of the atrocities in Bucha for Canadian media, I found that my experience remained difficult to communicate even to people close to me. We spoke the same language, yet the meaning did not reach my interlocutors. This sense of "invisibility" became the starting point for my hypothesis.

Thus, I decided to write a play that would, first, make visible the emotional experience of those who have survived multiple amputations and severe war trauma, and second, open a space for symbolic restoration for survivors—understood as the restoration of symbolic agency: the possibility to re-enter language, address, and relation through forms of witnessing that make traumatic experience socially recognizable and shareable without reducing its complexity.

My intention was not simply to depict trauma, which always risks simplification, but to create a dramaturgical form capable of carrying the weight of what cannot be fully spoken. This required translating the stages of trauma and recovery into the language of theatre: into plot, dialogue, and action that carry traumatic experience from fragmentation to reconnection and commonality.

Although the play is not divided into formal acts, through its hybrid form—combining elements of classical tragedy, Joseph Campbell's monomyth, and Judith Herman's model of trauma and recovery—the play guides the audience through the main episodes of the

protagonist's traumatic experience: the collapse, the encounter with death and loss, and the fragile emergence of his re-newed identity.

The text is grounded in documentary testimonies, interviews, and real accounts of Ukrainian soldiers who survived amputation, blindness, and civilians who survived the terror of war crimes. At the same time, it remains a work of drama: a structured narrative space in which these experiences can be held, witnessed, and reflected upon.

The Conception of the Play: Creating a Story That Matters

From the first days of the Russian-Ukrainian war, I—like millions of others—was confronted with the unimaginable. Airstrikes, shelling, and the invasion of the Kyiv region, where my family and I lived, collapsed upon us with overwhelming force. We not only endured the fear and chaos of direct threat but also became witnesses to the terror and grief of others. On the third day of the war, we fled, saving our children as shells' explosions grew closer. The journey toward the relatively safer mountains of western Ukraine took 21 hours of continuous movement, with routes constantly changing to avoid areas already under attack. We were lucky to spend one night in Yaremche, sleeping on the floor of a small hotel room—the only bed we had for the children. The next day, after dozens of hours on the road among thousands of other Ukrainians, we finally crossed the border.

In early March 2022, already in safety, I was asked by colleagues to help organize photographic evidence of the war for CBC Canada. For ten days, I sorted more than 1,500 photos and videos from Bucha, Irpin, and other occupied towns, categorizing them by city, type of victim, and circumstances. Thus, I became a secondary witness to atrocity—seeing the

documented murders of civilians who, only days earlier, had lived peaceful lives. The volume of recorded suffering was overwhelming. It took me more than a year and a half of personal therapy to process my trauma and to regain the capacity to take a full breath. During this time, I remained in contact with those affected by the war. As a Gestalt therapist, under supervision, I supported clients who had lost family members, friends, or homes. This period created my three-fold experience of trauma: through media, through the grief of others, and through my own self. This convergence fundamentally changed my perception of how trauma is perceived on different levels.

I noticed that, despite its documentary force, media representation often depersonalizes suffering. When audiences are repeatedly exposed to violent or traumatic imagery, their initial shock weakens. Over time, the images "lose [their] capacity to elicit strong emotions," a process researchers describe as desensitization — a protective dampening of emotional response that follows repeated exposure to violence. This numbing does not only blunt affect; it also shifts perception, transforming another person's pain into a familiar script rather than an encounter with a singular, living body (Anderson and Dill 786–87). In contrast, direct contact with mourning individuals generated a different emotional field—one impossible to distance from. Yet this intimacy also exposed an ethical tension. In therapy, the confidentiality of grief is essential; public exposure of a client's pain would constitute a breach of ethics. At the same time, confining all this pain to private rooms felt unjust. The sheer magnitude of collective loss demanded a form of social acknowledgment, a space where suffering could be witnessed without being exploited.

My own trauma—the helplessness, fear, and shame of survival—also required a form of articulation. However, I struggled to find a language that could hold both authenticity and appropriateness. Like many other survivors, I hesitated to speak publicly because my suffering felt secondary compared to that of those who had lost loved ones or limbs. Being trapped within my own trauma, I realized from my personal experience that healing is inseparable from communication. As Judith Herman notes, "recovery can take place only within the context of a relationship" (Herman 191). Thus, healing seeks a listener, but one capable of hearing responsibly.

Gradually, three layers of experience began to align to a triptych: the media reality, distorted to a high grade of dehumanization, the intimate spaces of grief of people I have been supporting as a therapist, and my own trauma as a personal experience of not being understood by many others. Despite their differences, all three layers followed the same logic of trauma—fragmented, repetitive, resistant to reconnection and closure. At the same time, I couldn't let myself put on paper any of those layers, in the form of a play, because each of these layers seemed too small against the volume of the collective pain—too private to speak for the multitude who had suffered.

The idea for the play emerged from this awareness. One day, I saw a news report about Ukrainian soldier Andriy Smolensky, who had lost both arms and his sight. His story struck me deeply: a man deprived of nearly every physical ability continued to live, love, be loved, and seek meaning through recovery (Davies et al.). I began to watch interviews with other amputees and with doctors working in rehabilitation centers. A vast landscape of pain and resilience unfolded before me. The survivors' testimonies were built on attempts to retell the ungraspable,

and behind every case stood not only a medical challenge, but also a psychological and social one.

As Judith Herman emphasizes, psychological recovery operates on several levels: the individual survivor, their family, and the broader society, which, to become a safe and supportive space that facilitates recovery and further reintegration, must first learn to re-see the victims of war. Collective wounds, political indifference, insufficient social support, and cultural avoidance often deepen rather than heal these consequences of war trauma and PTSD. The sad example of political ignorance is that, as of 2025, even soldiers with Group I war-related disabilities—men who have lost both arms, legs, or sight—are granted an official monthly pension of merely 27,000 UAH (around 930 CAD), a figure that silently testifies to the society's blindness toward human loss (Pension Fund of Ukraine). Additionally, Ukrainian society is torn by different types of cultural traumas and experiences a lack of empathy for veterans—a gap manifested in stigmatization, fear, and misunderstanding of those returning from the front (Wanner and Pavlenko; Ukrainian Veteran Fund; MH4U).

At that moment, it became clear to me what kind of story I need to tell. The play must center on a soldier who has lost his arms, legs, and sight—a man forced to rebuild his life without the physical means to engage with the world. Its purpose is not simply to depict suffering but to restore visibility and dignity—by giving voice to those who can no longer speak for themselves. Theatre, unlike politics or journalism, possesses a unique capacity to publicly address tragedy while preserving intimacy by transforming individual testimonies of collective experience into artistic form, thereby creating a bridge between personal trauma and social awareness, enabling public grieving. As Judith Butler reminds us, "We might think of war as

dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not. An ungrievable life cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all" (Butler 38). Theatre, then, can become an act of recognition—an ethical space where grief is neither silenced nor consumed. I believe that a story that matters must offer support. It must stand beside the wounded without dissolving into pity. True empathy requires clarity and courage: the ability to look where society prefers not to. For me, writing this play became an ethical act—an attempt to restore connection among those who had lost their sense of one another in the effort to survive the unbearable.

Object of Study and Research Aim

The play will artistically depict the hero's physical and emotional suffering, as well as his path to psychological recovery. I aim to explore how integrating stages of war trauma and recovery into the patterns of classical tragedy and the monomyth can shape a dramatic form that makes post-traumatic experience recognizable to the audience.

Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that a play about post-traumatic stress disorder becomes more effective when three narrative structures are interwoven: classical tragedy, the hero's journey, and the clinical stages of PTSD recovery. Each contributes its own dimension.

- Tragedy, as Aristotle defines in the Poetics, represents the movement from error – hamartia (Aristotle 2352), through suffering – pathos (Aristotle 2324) and recognition – anagnorisis (Aristotle 2324), toward catharsis (Aristotle 2320).

- The hero's journey reveals the character's internal transformation (Campbell 14-15) through trials (Campbell 90), an encounter with the "shadow" (Campbell 211; Jung 20), and a return with new knowledge (Campbell 211).
- The stages of PTSD, from initial terror and disconnection to the process of recovery, give this universal scheme credibility, showing the real process of suffering and rehabilitation (Herman 48, 74, 191-312).

Thus, tragedy and the hero's journey provide a time-tested dramatic and mythological framework, while the dynamic portrayal of stages of PTSD anchors the play in psychological truth, allowing the audience to understand the devastating power of trauma and the emotional experience of the traumatized person.

Methodology

The methodology of this project consists of four stages. It encompasses the development of a theoretical framework for the proposed play, the collection of materials from documentary sources and creative writing, and an analysis of the new play.

The first step involved researching and describing the most common stages of PTSD, including its recovery phases. For the success of the plot, it was imperative to identify the most common and indicative symptoms of PTSD, as they had to serve as the foundation for realistically portraying the protagonist's experience. These stages and symptoms were then aligned with the structures of classical tragedy and the hero's journey to identify their common traits and develop a unified framework for a future plot.

The second step involved watching dozens of interviews with Ukrainian soldiers who had undergone amputations and suffered from PTSD, as well as reviewing many hours of real-time GoPro footage recorded by assault groups during combat operations. Additionally, I collected statistical data and conducted interviews with civilians and children who had experienced loss during the war.

The third step involved creating the play within the predefined framework, integrating verbatim voices and documentary facts into the fabric of the artistic text. I wrote the play first in Russian. The English version included here is my translation, developed through revision and consultation with dramaturg Rachael Powles to preserve nuance, rhythm, and meaning. In parallel, I kept a diary to record my thoughts during the work, including my doubts, feelings, and reasons for making confident artistic choices.

The last, fourth step, was to examine how well the amalgamation of PTSD recovery stages, the structural elements of tragedy, the hero's journey, and all other elements contributed to the overall effectiveness of a post-traumatic play after its completion. During this phase, a detailed analysis of the play's text, including its themes, characters, and symbols, has been conducted.

This study examines whether incorporating trauma stages into the protagonist's journey, along with introducing the element of the protagonist's rebirth at the tragedy's conclusion, can transform it into a post-traumatic play that makes the protagonist's experience more recognizable to the reader.

Personal competence

My experience as a seasoned theatrical professional, a practicing Gestalt therapist, and an individual who has endured the vicarious trauma while processing photo and video materials from the Bucha massacre has prepared me to conduct this project successfully.

In my capacity as a theatre professional with over two decades of experience applying the Stanislavsky system to teaching acting, I have repeatedly observed and experienced the therapeutic effects of theatrical performances on both performers and spectators.

As a Gestalt therapist, I am presently engaged in voluntary work under supervision, assisting individuals from Ukraine who have endured the traumas of war and loss. Their traumatic experiences have irreversibly changed their lives, making a return to their former existence complex, if not elusive. On the other hand, the traumatic events precipitated a profound shift in their self-perception and worldview, redirecting their adaptation focus toward exploring their new identities. Thus, trauma, besides its complexity, may serve as the starting point and a foundation of a transformative journey.

The idea to write a post-traumatic play came to me in connection with my own traumatic experience as a witness to genocide. During the initial stages of the war, I assisted in cataloging photo and video evidence of the Bucha genocide for CBC News. I sorted and handed more than 1,500 photos and videos to representatives of the television company, most of which I will never forget.

I share Judith L. Herman's position that one of the key tasks of recovery is the right of victims to be heard and validated (Herman 191-192). I also believe that works of art, such as

plays and performances, provide an opportunity for artists to speak out on behalf of victims and serve as an essential form of testimony, and that is precisely what I aim to do in this work.

Chapter 1. War and Traumatic Disorders

1.1 History, Context of the Russian-Ukrainian War

The plot of the play "*Thy Word Be Done*," which serves as the realization of the hypothesis and the object of this study, unfolds during the full-scale phase of the Russian-Ukrainian War of 2022–2025. To fully understand the plot details, including its multiple cultural references, quotations, and verbatim scenes, it is essential to delve into the history of relations between Ukraine and Russia and the role Russia played in the origins of the current conflict.

For centuries, Ukraine lived under the rule of neighbouring empires. “In 1772, the Ukrainians of Galicia and Bukovyna came under Austrian rule. By 1795, the entire Right Bank was incorporated into the Russian Empire” (Subtelny 177).

In the 20th century, Ukraine declared its independence twice. The first instance occurred from 1917 to 1921, when the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR) emerged following the collapse of the Russian Empire, only to be later crushed by the Bolsheviks and subsequently incorporated into the USSR **(**Subtelny 344-386). The second time was in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the referendum on December 1, 1991, “over 90% of the voters cast their ballots for independence, a result far surpassing even the most optimistic projections”, starting a new era in Ukrainian history (Subtelny 583).

During the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian language and culture were subjected to systematic repression and restrictions. For example, “In July 1863, Petr Valuev, the minister of internal affairs, secretly banned the publication in Ukrainian of all scholarly, religious, and especially pedagogical publications” (Subtelny 282). During the Soviet era, the

harsh Russification was continued “in 1933 when Stalin declared local nationalism… the main threat to Soviet unity. This ideological reversal signalled the end of Ukrainization and ushered in a policy of systematic discrimination against Ukrainian culture. The number of Ukrainian-language schools was reduced; the percentage of Ukrainian teachers and researchers declined markedly; outstanding works of Ukrainian scholarship and literature were removed from library bookshelves; hundreds of Ukrainian plays were banned and scores of Ukrainian theatres closed; and museum staff received orders to stop "idealizing Cossack history” (Subtelny 422).

By the time of independence in 1991, Ukraine had become a predominantly bilingual country: Russian was widely spoken in cities and in the east and south of the country, while Ukrainian remained dominant in the west (Subtelny 656).

In its political development, Ukraine chose a democratic path, in contrast to the growing authoritarian trend in Russia after the 2000s. The most important feature of Ukrainian political culture was the mass mobilization of society in regular protests, known as "Maidans". Among them:

- "Revolution on Granite” (1990), a student hunger strike against the union treaty;
- “Orange Revolution” (2004), mass protests against falsifications in the presidential elections;
- The “Revolution of Dignity” (2013–2014) was sparked by Viktor Yanukovych’s refusal to sign an association agreement with the EU, resulting in mass casualties.

Each of these protests confirmed the deep-rooted commitment to democratic values and rejection of autocracy in Ukrainian society (Kuzio 70-140). Gradually, cultural and linguistic Ukrainization took place, as well as the strengthening of the country's European orientation in

music, cinema, education and politics (Law of Ukraine on Education; Law of Ukraine on the State Language; Pesenti).

These processes increased the distance between Ukraine and Russia, where, at the same time, the consolidation of the authoritarian regime took place. The strengthening of Ukraine's democratic and European aspirations came into direct conflict with the Kremlin's imperial logic, which gradually led to an escalation of political and military confrontation, marking the beginning of a hybrid war, followed by a traditional one. Thus, the Russian-Ukrainian war developed in stages over the centuries, entering the modern hybrid phase in 2014, after the annexation of Crimea and the start of hostilities in Donbas. By 2022, "the military invasion of Ukraine has ended up with a rather traditional type of warfare aimed at the physical destruction of Ukrainian military and non-military infrastructure … [while] the core elements of the hybrid war concept … faded away in 2022" (Kurnyshova and Makarychev).

In the first months of full-scale war in 2022, Ukraine's resistance was not only military but also social. As Frederick Kagan and Mark Polyak note in TIME magazine, public trust in state institutions increased to an unprecedented level: "trust in local and national governments rose from 15% in August 2021 to 82% in August 2022" (Kagan and Polyak). For a country that has historically been skeptical of centralized authority, this change was of monumental importance. Kurnyshova and Makarychev explain this phenomenon through the concept of "hybrid resilience," based on self-organization, decentralization, and civil society activism (Kurnyshova and Makarychev). Thus, as they emphasize, "Russia's hybrid military capabilities have been overestimated… while the scale and potential of Ukrainian resilience have been underestimated" (Kurnyshova and Makarychev).

At the start of the invasion, the number of volunteers exceeded the army's expectations. According to military expert Oleksandr Danylyuk of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), "the number of people wishing to join the army significantly exceeded the needs of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and at that time there were queues at military registration and enlistment offices." By July 2022, the number of Ukrainian Defence Forces (UDF) reached "almost 1 million people, most of whom were mobilized" (Danylyuk). As defence analyst Mykola Bielieskov notes, in the first weeks of the war, simplified recruitment rules allowed "about 50 thousand Ukrainians to enlist by the end of February 26, 2022," and by May 2022 their number had grown to "approximately 110,000." Additionally, approximately 70,000 people joined 700 volunteer territorial formations nationwide. The rapid deployment of TDF units prevented Russia from implementing the original plan to isolate large cities: "The deployment of TDF in the first month of total war made it possible to organize mass popular resistance and inflict maximum losses… on the enemy" (Bielieskov).

1.2 Fragmentation of Ukrainian Society by Divergent Traumas

While the Russian invasion has engendered a remarkable degree of solidarity in Ukrainian society (OpoRUA; VoxUkraine), it has also created new social cleavages, dividing society into several groups: those who remained in Ukraine and those who went abroad; those who joined the army and those who continued to lead a civilian life; those who experienced occupation and loss and those whose daily lives remained relatively unchanged (Gradus Research). Each of these groups has experienced the war on a physical and emotional level –

combat wounds, grief and loss, exile, forced displacement, stigmatization for specific socially significant reasons, such as evading military service or leaving the country (Rose).

Millions of Ukrainians have suffered personal trauma while simultaneously experiencing different types of cultural trauma. As Jeffrey C. Alexander, a prominent American sociologist, notes: "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways." (Alexander 1) Different types of cultural trauma can complicate cross-group understanding if members of one group refuse to recognize the suffering of members of the other group. "By denying the reality of others' suffering, people not only diffuse their own responsibility for the suffering but often project the responsibility for their own suffering on these others. In other words, by refusing to participate in what I will describe as the process of trauma creation, social groups restrict solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone." (Alexander 1) The lived experiences of soldiers, displaced persons, bereaved families, and emigrants shape different forms of suffering, and such differences reinforce the disunity between those social groups. As Dominick LaCapra stresses, "being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call empathic unsettlement" (LaCapra 41). This means, as he further explains, that "empathy that resists full identification … depends on one's recognition that another's loss is not identical to one's own loss" (LaCapra 79). Thus, one of the most difficult post-war tasks will be to establish a dialogue that works across these differences between groups that have experienced different traumas, aiming to reduce the post-traumatic fragmentation of Ukrainian society.

Since war-related post-traumatic stress disorder is the most studied type of PTSD (Herman 28-40; van der Kolk 3, 7-12), its diagnostic criteria (Herman 177-178) and the staged model of recovery (Herman 191-222) make this experience an indicative model for analysis, as well as for the search for artistic means of understanding. It is precisely in the case of PTSD that theatre can become a communicative "bridge", allowing viewers who have never experienced such trauma to come closer to perceiving the experience of victims (Hirsch 31-32). In dramatic form, the causes and consequences of PTSD can be conveyed to a broader audience, turning personal experiences into part of a collective narrative (Felman 2–6; Laub 57, 70–71). In this way, individual pain gets a chance to be heard, and society gets a space for recognizing and integrating these experiences (Balfour 3-4; Shay 188).

1.3 Characteristics of PTSD Complicated by Amputation

According to the DSM-5, PTSD is marked by four groups of symptoms: intrusive reliving of the trauma (such as flashbacks or nightmares), persistent avoidance, lasting shifts in mood and cognition, and heightened states of arousal (DSM-5-TR, Trauma- and Stressor-Related Disorders). Judith Herman underlines that these reactions are not signs of personal weakness but rather a natural response to unbearable experience: "According to the Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry, the common denominator of psychological trauma is a feeling of 'intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and the threat of annihilation'" (qtd. in Herman 49). War generates exactly such conditions. Soldiers live under constant threat and exposure to violence, while civilians are forced to survive bombardments, displacement, captivity, and the loss of loved ones.

Among the most destructive war injuries is amputation. Beyond the immediate physical harm, the loss of a limb acts as a profound psychological shock. For instance, a Sri Lankan study of injured combatants reported PTSD rates of 42.5% among lower-limb amputees and 33.3% among upper-limb amputees (Abeyasinghe et al. 379). Qualitative studies show that veterans who have lost limbs often speak of intense trauma-related distress, intrusive memories, and long-lasting psychological struggles — clear evidence that amputation deepens the risk of PTSD beyond the physical wound itself (Murray et al. 2023). Such trauma is therefore twofold: first, it is inseparable from the violent event that caused the injury; second, it continues to reverberate in daily life through loss of independence, the struggle of rehabilitation, and the reshaping of social identity.

PTSD, including its form complicated by amputation, has become one of the most widespread conditions among Ukrainian soldiers since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The devastating consequences of such a form of PTSD extend well beyond each injured individual. Beyond clinical symptoms, it can socially isolate survivors from their families and communities, deepen stigma and undermine their ability to reintegrate. In Ukraine, the scale of the situation is overwhelming. By mid-2024, the Ministry of Health reported close to 100,000 war-related amputations. At the same time, the World Health Organization estimated that around 15 million people required psychological assistance, with 3–4 million in need of psychiatric medication (World Health Organization 2025).

These figures make it clear that the recovery of a nation may take decades and must be approached not only clinically but also culturally. As Judith Herman observes, healing is only possible in a safe social environment, because “empowerment and reconnection are the core

experiences of recovery" (Herman 287). The following section will show that recovery from PTSD does not follow a straight path but moves through overlapping stages and shifting scenarios, which makes the task of victims' recovery quite challenging.

1.4 Stages of Recovery and Cultural Contexts

PTSD is not a static condition but a dynamic process that unfolds over time. Judith Herman describes recovery in three stages: "The first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life" (Herman 223). Other clinicians outline a similar sequence. Bessel van der Kolk, John Briere and Catherine Scott discuss stabilization, trauma processing, and reintegration (van der Kolk 206-231**;** Briere and Scott 97-99). Courtois and Ford stress that recovery is not about erasing memories but about integrating them into the survivor's coherent life story narrative (Courtois and Ford 53-55). Herman emphasizes that proper recovery requires the reconstruction of identity and the restoration of trust in one's body (Herman 229-232). Thus, in cases complicated by amputations, this process becomes even more challenging due to the altered body image.

However, despite the precise outline of its stages, all of these models caution against treating recovery as a linear process. Stages may overlap, regress, or repeat; setbacks are common; some survivors live with chronic symptoms even while partially healed. Recovery is less a path than a set of scenarios: for some, marked by retraumatization and ongoing suffering, for others, by resilience and transformation (Herman 223-225). In dramaturgical terms, this

highlights the importance of nonlinear, recursive narratives that reflect the rhythm of trauma itself.

It's worth mentioning that recovery often takes years. Many survivors continue to struggle with intrusive memories, avoidance, or hyperarousal long after therapy. Research shows that veterans face much higher suicide rates than the general population: “After the analysis controlled for age and gender differences, the number of observed veteran suicides was approximately 20% higher than expected in 2000 … and this increased to 60% higher by 2010” (Hoffmire et al. 959). Family relationships are also profoundly affected. As Karney and Crown summarize, “the experience of symptoms of PTSD has been significantly associated with elevated levels of hostile behaviour, decreased capacity for intimacy, marital distress, and domestic violence” (Karney and Crown 42). On top of this personal suffering, stigma, and lack of therapeutic resources, cultural pressures and political silence are added (WHO Special Initiative for Mental Health 6). Thus, an extra form of support and therapy that can lower the rates of PTSD-related losses is needed as never before.

In Ukraine, with a society exhausted by war, with a scarcity of medical and psychiatric resources, and a constant threat of new traumatizations, the search for accessible, cultural and artistic practices becomes essential.

Theories of posttraumatic growth suggest that survivors can find new values and deeper relationships through their trauma (Tedeschi and Calhoun 7). Testimonies, whether spoken or written, help transform fragmented memories into narratives that can be shared and acknowledged (Felman and Laub 57, 70-71). Cathy Caruth highlights how narrative can give form to delayed and fragmented memory, turning repetition into meaning (Caruth 4). In theatre,

Diana Taylor demonstrates how performance serves as a repertoire of memory (Taylor 23), while Carol Martin highlights the role of verbatim theatre in bearing witness to traumatic events (Martin 58). Ritual frameworks described by Victor Turner and Richard Schechner further illustrate how performance can provide a collective space for crisis and transformation (Turner 94-96; Schechner 57-58).

Thus, the prospects for recovery extend not only to therapy rooms but also to the broader sociocultural environment. As Herman reminds us, "Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (Herman 191). When traumatic suffering is expressed publicly through art, it can be recognized, validated, and destigmatized. Survivors' stories then become part of their lives, but no longer define them entirely. Theatre, with its nature as a witness and a ritual, can serve as precisely such a platform, enabling both the articulation of trauma and the possibility of healing.

1.5 Historical Precedents: Tragedy as Collective Recovery

The idea of tragedy as a means of reflecting on the consequences of war has a solid historical basis. In ancient Athens, tragedies were performed before audiences consisting of citizens, many of whom were soldiers and war orphans—young men whose fathers had died fighting for the state (Goldhill 121–122). Such an audience was not composed of abstract observers, but rather members of society who had personally experienced war and its consequences in one way or another. As Jonathan Shay argues, Homer's *Iliad* reflects the psychological wounds of combat so directly that recounting it before citizen-soldiers in Athens must have carried a therapeutic function, allowing collective recognition of war trauma (Shay

xiii–xiv, xxi–xxii). He also notes that Homer himself was revered as a "physician of the soul" (Shay 188), underscoring the long-held view of poetry as a means of healing.

Also, playwrights were often veterans themselves. Aeschylus, who fought at Marathon (490 BC), depicted in *The Persians* (31–86) not the triumph of Athens, but the suffering of the vanquished, creating a space for collective reflection. As Edith Hall emphasizes, “The Persians are treated with remarkable 'sympathy,' and the ethnic colouring is overcome by Aeschylus's sense of human unity. Taken to its extreme, this view sees the play as a conscious warning to the Athenians against imperial expansion” (Hall 202). Sophocles' *Philoctetes* depicts the loneliness of the disabled warrior, abandoned yet irreplaceable: Neoptolemus “will not take Troy without him” (Sophocles 113). As Lawrence Tritle notes, the play “takes on a special significance: first, as a drama about the consequences of war in general, but, more specifically, about its impact on survivors” (195). Euripides explored the devastating impact of trauma on both soldiers and civilians: in *Heracles*, the returning hero, in a fit of madness, kills his children (“Heracles” 1000–1045); in *The Trojan Women*, enslaved and orphaned women mourn the destruction of their world (“The Trojan Women” 95–120). As Nicole Loraux argues, such tragic laments served as a civic means through which Athenians conveyed the grief of war (Loraux 21–25).

Tragedy in antiquity, then, was never simply entertainment. It was a civic practice that, first, gave voice to suffering, second, created symbolic spaces for mourning, and third, facilitated collective reflection on the cost of war. Thus, if tragedy once served as a societal framework for integrating the experience of battle and loss, then post-traumatic dramaturgy can now serve a similar function: bridging the gap between those who personally experience PTSD and those who must learn to recognize and respond to its reality.

Chapter 2. From Classical Models of Tragedy and Heroism to Post-Traumatic Dramaturgy

2.1 Structural Parallels between Tragedy and Trauma

Classical tragedy, structured by a progression of elements—peripeteia, anagnorisis, change from good to bad fortune, and catharsis—can serve as a framework for representing dramatic events that portray a human crisis and its consequences. Although mythos forms the foundation of tragedy for Aristotle—the "soul" of the form—its most decisive moments occur in the combination of peripeteia and anagnorisis. Aristotle defines these as "a reversal of fortune" and "a change from ignorance to knowledge" (Aristotle 2324), and notes that their coincidence, as in Oedipus, produces the strongest tragic effect. The subsequent fall from good fortune to bad (Aristotle 2325) provides the ground for what later criticism calls catastrophe, experienced by the audience as both logical and inevitable. As Hans-Thies Lehmann observes, Aristotle treats anagnorisis as an epistemological event: "an insight taking place within" that defines both the hero and his destiny (Lehmann 20). For Aristotle, such inner logic makes tragedy "more philosophical than history," since it reveals the hidden order of things and directs the audience toward mathesis (Aristotle 2323; Lehmann 19–20). The logos-like structure of the text becomes central, and catharsis may be achieved even through reading without performance itself (Lehmann 20; Aristotle 2321). Building on this perspective, anagnorisis can be understood not only as the turning point for the hero but also as a moment of recognition for the audience. Hans-Thies Lehmann characterizes Aristotle's key categories (peripeteia, anagnorisis, catharsis) as "parasitically logical concepts" because they borrow their structure from logic: the tragic plot

unfolds like a syllogism, with each event following by necessity or probability from the previous one (Lehmann 19). In this sense, tragedy is conceived less as a theatrical spectacle than as a logos-like structure that intelligibly renders human confrontation with extreme circumstances and suffering. Much like the development of an argument to prove an idea, the tragic plot pivots on peripeteia, which “opens up something new” (Lehmann 19). Therefore, through its composition, tragedy not only stages the crisis in its most dramatic form but also renders it intelligible and available to the audience as a process of learning (mathesis).

The structure of tragedy offers a symbolic model that parallels the structure of trauma. Aristotle’s description of myth as a whole, consisting of a "beginning, middle, and end," suggests the initially stable hero's world, which can then be destroyed (Aristotle 2321). This corresponds to what Ronnie Janoff-Bulman calls the survivor’s “assumptive world”—a system of fundamental beliefs, which provides stability and orientation in life. As she notes, traumatic events shatter the fundamental assumptions that the world is benevolent, meaningful, and that the self is worthy (Janoff-Bulman 11-19). In this sense, exposition in tragedy parallels the pre-traumatic world: both depict a state of equilibrium that is violently destroyed by crisis. The sudden peripeteia mirrors the traumatic event itself, which disrupts the established order and plunges the hero into suffering that corresponds to shock and the initial disorientation described in trauma theory. Anagnorisis, or recognition, is comparable to what Judith Herman describes as the stage of trauma recovery in which the traumatic memory is transformed from a compulsive symptom into a narrative that can be consciously remembered and re-interpreted (Herman 175–195). In tragedy, these uncontrolled memories are given dramatic form, leading both the hero and the audience to a moment of understanding. Thus, the tragic model does by default what never

occurs automatically in trauma—it translates chaotic traumatic memory into an act of recognition and insight. Hans-Thies Lehmann underscores that tragedy “articulates an order for thinking” (Lehmann 19), and its structure can indeed transform a symptom into an act of acknowledgment and comprehension. Thus, in tragedy, catastrophe following trauma reflects the fragmentation of the self and the collapse of meaning, while catharsis parallels Judith Herman’s notion of “remembrance and mourning,” in which suffering is articulated and thereby made shareable and integrable (Herman 175–195). The difference between trauma and tragedy, then, is that what in reality remains a symptom is, in tragedy, “symbolically carried through” to the point of recognition.

This parallel highlights how the dramaturgical form of tragedy shapes a symbolic framework for representing the psychological stages of trauma, and explains why tragedy remains such a compelling medium for dramatizing both the destructive impact of violence and the fragile possibility of renewal.

2.2 The Tragic Hero and the Experience of Trauma

According to Aristotle, the tragic hero must be elevated to those “above our own level of goodness” (Aristotle 2317). Aristotle also points out that tragic protagonists were typically drawn from “those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity; e.g. Oedipus, Thyestes, and the men of note of similar families” (Aristotle 2325). David Rush asks a fair question: "Can Willy Loman, for example, be considered a tragic hero if he is merely a member of the middle class and not a king? Can there be a tragedy of the lower classes?" And immediately answers: "Yes, if

we take elevation to have more than just a sociopolitical meaning, and use the term to mean 'better than us' in other ways; that is, someone who is braver, nobler, morally stronger..." (Rush 106). One can debate whether Willy Loman is “morally stronger” than most: he is not noble, yet he is tragically transparent—his life shows what happens when dignity depends on market success and other people’s recognition. His death is not heroic; it is an attempt to convert himself into posthumous value through an insurance payout. Thus, even if Rush’s formula does not literally describe Loman, it remains useful: modern tragedy shifts “elevation” from the realm of status to the realm of ultimate existential stakes. In this sense, the hero's nobility in a modern context can be interpreted as the nobility of spirit. This interpretation aligns with the dominant public discourse in Ukraine today, where soldiers defending their country are widely regarded as belonging to the highest moral rank. Since my play is devoted to the theme of military trauma, the figure of a tragic military hero, associated with the frontline defenders of the nation, organically continues the line of nobility that both Aristotle and Rush attribute to this concept.

Moreover, according to Aristotle, a tragic hero must fall into misfortune not because of vice, but because of hamartia—an error of action. As Aristotle notes: tragedy depicts «a man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some fault, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity; e.g. Oedipus, Thyestes, and the men of note of similar families» (Aristotle 2325). Aristotle writes that the essence of tragedy is “to see the fall of a man who is neither wholly good nor wholly evil, but who suffers through his own action” (Rush 107). In a military context, a hero's hamartia can manifest itself in various forms. Sometimes it's a tactical miscalculation, often due to incomplete information. Sometimes it's a manifestation of human weakness, such as

susceptibility to emotions or fatigue. However, usually, and this is one of the most paradoxical situations, a hero's hamartia manifests itself in the impossibility of choice: the inability to avoid war, the inability to abandon comrades, and the inability to refuse duty. In each of these cases, the hero's action becomes fatal precisely because it leads to catastrophic consequences and, as a consequence, to suffering—and in wartime, to the suffering of thousands, which takes on truly tragic proportions.

In the classical model, the meaning of the consequences of hamartia lies in anagnorisis—the recognition of truth that comes too late to change fate but reveals the human condition. As Aristotle emphasizes: “A discovery is, as the very word implies, a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the personages marked for good or evil fortune. The finest form of discovery is one attended by reversal, like that which goes with the discovery in Oedipus. … This, with a reversal, will arouse either pity or fear—actions of that nature being what tragedy is assumed to represent” (Aristotle 2324). While Aristotle frames the hero’s downfall as a necessary element of tragic structure leading to pity and fear, in a contemporary reading, the death of the hero may also be seen as a form of testimony: his story demonstrates the cost of striving for ideals in a world governed by violence, chance, and fate. However, in the context of post-traumatic experience, this model has to be purposefully upgraded. The primary goal of this study is to create a play that is not only a testament to suffering but also a space of hope, where anagnorisis can alter the hero's fate. In this case, death becomes symbolic: it is not an end, but a transition from one form of existence to another, a kind of rebirth in a new capacity.

This interpretation aligns with contemporary trauma theory. Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma manifests as knowledge that comes too late (belatedness) (Caruth 4). In this sense, a

theatrical performance, or even a reading of a play with a logos-like structure, is an opportunity to redirect this anagnorisis toward transformation rather than a final catastrophe. Judith Herman writes that the final stage of recovery is "reconnection," a return to life and relationships after trauma (Herman 286). It is this moment that can be dramatized as the symbolic "death" of an old identity and the emergence of a new one. Dori Laub also notes that witnessing itself has a transformative power (Laub 70). In this vein, the tragic form is not denied but reimagined: witnessing both—symbolic death and rebirth—becomes a witness to hope—both for the victims and for society, which must learn to hear and integrate their experiences.

Thus, the figure of the tragic hero resonates with modern individuals—whether military or civilian—who have experienced extreme violence. Soldiers and volunteers consciously put themselves in danger, sacrificing their health and lives in the name of loyalty, duty, or love. They often emerge from these trials broken, torn from their former selves, and marked by chronic suffering. Their biographies, like those of tragic heroes, become testaments to human resilience in the face of war and violence.

2.3 Monomyth and Trauma Recovery

The structures of Campbell’s monomyth and Judith Herman’s model of trauma recovery share deep parallels, showing how a mythological pattern echoes contemporary descriptions in the theory of trauma. Both models describe a transition from stability to chaos, through rupture and ordeal, and toward some form of return. The following table aligns Campbell's monomyth stages with Herman’s three-stage clinical model to clarify their correspondences (Table 1). The

third column of the table highlights their shared characteristics, showing how the myth's narrative and the development from trauma to recovery follow a similar arc, even while carrying different assumptions about the final outcome.

Table 1. Comparative Table of Monomyth and Trauma Recovery

#	**Hero's Journey (Campbell)**	**Trauma Theory (Herman)**	**Common Features**
1.	Call to Adventure (Campbell 42, 48) — intrusion of the unknown into ordinary life.	Stage I: Terror (Herman 48) — collapse of basic security: "traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care…"	Both mark the break of stability. Campbell: "a blunder… reveals an unsuspected world" (Campbell 42). Herman: The survivor loses "a sense of control, connection, and meaning." Life divides into a "before" and an "after" (Herman 48).
2.	Refusal of the Call (Campbell 49) — refusal, hesitation.	Disconnection (Herman 74-75) – the loss of trust and positive value of the self.	Refusal of the unbearable. Campbell: "Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative"; the hero hesitates and "becomes a victim to be saved" (Campbell 49); Herman: "Traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living" (Herman 75).
3.	Supernatural Aid (Campbell 57) — the mentor or helper.	The Effect of Social Support (Herman 89) – a supportive response from a sympathetic person.	A need for a protective figure. Campbell: "For those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure" (Campbell 57) Herman: "The survivor who is often in terror of being left alone craves the simple presence of a sympathetic person" (Herman 89).

4.	Crossing of the First Threshold (Campbell 64) — entry into the darkness of the unknown.	The Therapy Contract (Herman 213) – commitment to the task of recovery.	The subject enters a realm with no way back. Campbell: "With the personifications of his destiny to guide and aid him, the hero goes forward in his adventure… Beyond [bounds] is darkness, the unknown, and danger" (Campbell 64). Herman: "It is a relationship of existential engagement, in which both partners commit themselves to the task of recovery" (Herman 213).
5.	The Belly of the Whale (Campbell 74-77) — symbolic death, to be born again.	Safety (Herman 223) – the central task for the first stage of recovery is establishing safety.	Finding and securing the refuge. Campbell: "The hero goes inward, to be born again" (Campbell 77). Herman: "The acutely traumatized person needs a safe refuge" (Herman 233).
6.	The Road of Trials (Campbell 81) — the hero must survive a succession of trials.	Stage II: Remembrance and Mourning (Herman 254) – reconstruction and transformation of traumatic memory.	Tests, enemies, and flashbacks alike: the subject suffers repetitions until meaning begins to emerge. Campbell: The hero "discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage" (Campbell 81). Herman: "The reconstruction of trauma places a great demands on the courage of both patient and therapist" (Herman 254).
7.	The Meeting with the Goddess (Campbell 91) — confronting ultimate truths.	Mourning Traumatic Loss (Herman 273) – telling of the trauma story, profound grief.	Encounter with the deepest, often unbearable core of experience. Campbell: "This is the crisis at the nadir… within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart" (Campbell 91). Herman: "The descent into mourning is… necessary and the most dreaded task... Patients often fear that the task is insurmountable" (Herman 273).

8.	Woman as the Temptress (Campbell 101) — the testing of the hero.	Learning to Fight (Herman 288) – conscious choice to face danger.	Taking power in real-life situations. Campbell: "Depth beyond depth of self-ignorance is fathomed….and always after the first thrills of getting under way, the adventure develops into a journey of darkness, horror, disgust, and phantasmagoric fears" (Campbell 101) Herman: "Rather than passively accepting… reliving experiences, survivors may choose actively to engage their fears" (Herman 288)
9.	Atonement with the Father (Campbell 105) – "abandonment of the attachment to ego itself" (Campbell 110).	Reconciling with Oneself (Herman 295) – the re-creation of an ideal self.	"I know I have myself"— the survivor no longer feels possessed by the traumatic past (Herman 295). Campbell: "Atonement (at-one-ment) consists in no more than the abandonment of that self-generated double monster–the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id)" (Campbell 107,110). Herman: "It takes courage to move out of the constructed stance of the victim. But just as the survivor must dare to confront her fears, she must also dare to define her wishes" (Herman 295).
10.	Apotheosis (Campbell 127) — hero becomes free of all fears.	Finding a Survivor Mission (Herman 303) – transformation of the meaning of personal tragedy to the basis for social action.	Social action offers survivors a source of power far beyond their own capacities (Herman 303). Campbell: "Like the Buddha himself, this godlike being is a pattern of the divine state to which the human hero attains who has gone beyond the last terror of ignorance" (Campbell 127). Herman: "While there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others" (Herman 303).

11.	The Ultimate Boon (Campbell 148) — the hero gets the prize or gift.	Resolving the trauma (Herman 309) – the survivor approaches the world with praise and awe rather than fear (Herman 310).	The hero gains the boon of immortality; the survivor discovers the capacity to live fully. Campbell: "The supreme boon desired for the Indestructible Body is uninterrupted residence in the Paradise of the Milk That Never Fails" (Campbell 150). Herman: "Having encountered the fear of death… [survivors] know how to celebrate life" (Herman 311-312).
12.	Refusal of the Return (Campbell 167) — reluctance to go back.	Reconnection, Isolation (Herman 286) – the survivor faces the task of creating a future.	Both the hero and the survivor hesitate, fearing returning to the others. Campbell: "The adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy… but the responsibility has been frequently refused" (Campbell 167). Herman: "Survivors often feel… as though they are refugees entering a new country… Helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma" (Herman 286, 287).
13.	The Magic Flight (Campbell 170) — the hero escapes with the prize.	Reconnection, Support of Others (Herman 302) – the survivor is open to new forms of engagement.	Community, allies, and therapists make reconnection possible. Campbell: "The hero… wins the blessing of the goddess or the god and is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with… elixir for the restoration of society" (Campbell 170). Herman: "Survivor may consider how best to share the trauma story… and how to draw lessons from this story that will protect children from future dangers" (Herman 302).

14	Rescue from Without (Campbell 178) – to return, the hero may have to get assistance from without.	Commonality (Herman 313) – the survivor's sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection to others.	The hero requires help to return from his journey; the survivor depends on the solidarity of others to restore her sense of self and humanity. Campbell: "The hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without" (Campbell 178) Herman: "The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience" (Herman 313).
15.	The Crossing of the Return Threshold (Campbell 188) – to return, the hero has to translate the ordeal into a shared language.	Testimony, Groups for Remembramce and Mourning (Herman 324) – group provide a powerful stimulant for survivors story and a sustaining source for emotional support.	Return requires translating the ordeal into a shared language. Campbell: "How teach again, however, what has been taught correctly and incorrectly learned a thousand times, throughout the millennia of mankind's prudent folly? That is the hero's ultimate difficult task" (Campbell 188). Herman: "The group bears witness to the survivor's testimony, giving it social as well as personal meaning" Herman (323-324).

16.	Master of Two Worlds (Campbell 196) – the hero holds a balance between worlds.	Integration (Herman 344) – the survivor must be ready to relinguish the "specialness" of her identity.	The hero holds a balance between worlds; the survivor integrates trauma and reconnects with others. Campbell: "His personal ambitions being totally dissolved, he no longer tries to live but willingly relaxes to whatever may come to pass in him… the law lives in him with his unreserved consent" (Campbell 205). Herman: "[Survivor] confronts the possibility of rejoining a wider world and forming connections with a broader range of people. This is clearly a task for the last stage of recovery" (Herman 343-344)
17.	Freedom to Live (Campbell 205) – "reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will" (Campbell 206).	Resolution (Herman 344) – the survivor finds resolution in resting from struggle and embracing ordinary life.	The hero attains freedom through reconciliation with universal will; the survivor finds resolution in resting from struggle and embracing ordinary life. Campbell: "Powerful in this insight, calm and free in action… the hero is the conscious vehicle of the terrible, wonderful Law" (Campbell 206). Herman: "The survivor who has achieved commonality with others can rest from her labors. Her recovery is accomplished; all that remains before her is her life" (Herman 344).

At the same time, comparing the two models also demonstrates significant differences in emphasis and telos. Campbell's model presupposes a relatively unified self that departs, undergoes testing, and ultimately returns to some version of the "ordinary world" bearing an elixir that symbolically redeems the journey. Herman's framework, by contrast, begins with a

shattered self, and there is no guarantee of a triumphant return, no promised elixir. In accordance with Herman, recovery may remain incomplete, and the survivor's task is not so much to restore a lost order as to assemble a new, minimally livable one from the ruins. Therefore, where the monomyth gravitates toward teleological closure and triumph, trauma theory insists on the fragility, partiality, and openness of any resolution.

The models also diverge in their treatment of time and repetition. The monomyth is narratively linear: each trial leads to the next and culminates in a climactic transformation. Herman, in contrast, underscores the fragmentation and cyclicality of traumatic return: progress is intermittent, and the survivor may oscillate between episodes of relative safety and renewed horror, between apparent breakthroughs and regression. This temporal structure complicates any straightforward application of the quest narrative to post-traumatic experience and suggests that the monomyth must be critically reworked in light of trauma theory if it is to be used at all in this context.

It is precisely here that an artistic rethinking of the monomyth becomes possible. By directly engaging with trauma, contemporary theatre can stretch and examine mythological boundaries rather than merely reproduce them. From this perspective, the parallel between the monomyth and the stages of post-traumatic experience offers a way for individual suffering to be articulated as a story in which the hero not only passes through the stages of personal catastrophe but is granted a difficult, and never guaranteed, possibility of transformation that both everyday experience and classical tragedy often withhold.

2.4 Limits of Linear Representation of Traumatic Experience

Classical tragedy offers a powerful model for representing crisis and human suffering, but it also carries apparent limitations when applied to trauma. Aristotle insisted on a plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end, moving toward catharsis (Aristotle 2321). The Hero's Journey, in turn, is built on the same kind of teleological arc, closing with the "return with the elixir" (Campbell 23). Trauma does not follow this logic. It breaks time apart, comes back in fragments and intrusive returns, and often arrives too late to be integrated into a coherent line (Caruth 4; Herman 37, 175). Here lies the key difference: tragedy and myth are driven by completion, while traumatic experience resists closure.

Tragedy also tends to universalize suffering, turning the hero's fall into a moral or metaphysical lesson (Aristotle 2324, Lehmann 19). The Hero's Journey works in a similar way, framing personal ordeals as meaningful only in the final return. Such a frame sets up an expectation of "successful overcoming," which, in the context of trauma, can easily turn into a demand for post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2). Trauma studies point in the opposite direction: they stress the radical uniqueness of each survivor's experience and the impossibility of reducing it to a single, universal meaning (Felman and Laub xiii–xx; Herman 9). Trauma always leaves a remainder, something that cannot be absorbed into a lesson or rounded into a finished arc. At the same time, both tragedy and the Hero's Journey usually center on one protagonist—Oedipus, Hamlet—through whom universal truths are revealed. But traumatic experience is often collective: wars, genocides, and forced displacements affect entire communities. In ancient tragedy, this collectivity was symbolized by the chorus, but in the modern European tradition, the chorus disappears, reinforcing individualization (Lehmann 67).

This kind of focus risks smoothing out multiple experiences into one "symbolic" case, silencing differences instead of letting them be heard.

The tragic model also presumes resolution through catharsis—at least for the spectator. Clinical reality shows otherwise: many survivors live with chronic symptoms that do not resolve (Herman 151–178; van der Kolk 221). The stage, then, may reflect trauma more truthfully in postdramatic forms that highlight fragmentation and openness (Lehmann 390), or in documentary theatre, which places testimony at the center (Martin 32) and often refuses verdict or cathartic resolution (Martin 71, 92).

For these reasons, while classical tragedy remains an indispensable foundation for making trauma visible, its limits point to the need for other dramaturgical means. The same applies to the Hero's Journey, whose arc of trials and return cannot contain the full complexity of traumatic experience. What is needed is an overlay of additional strategies—repetition, broken rhythm, a polyphony of voices, fragmentation, documentary material. These techniques do not exhaust the possibilities, but they reveal the principle: trauma can only be conveyed through forms that hold its cyclical, collective, and unresolved nature. In this sense, dramaturgy rooted in traumatic experience shifts away from linear narrative and becomes a space of testimony, where catharsis yields to the right to be heard.

2.5 Toward a Post-Traumatic Dramaturgy

The earlier sections have shown both the affinities and the limits of classical tragedy in relation to trauma. In Aristotle, tragedy mirrors trauma insofar as it stages crisis and recognition

(Aristotle 2323-2324). But it always drives toward an ending—catharsis (Aristotle 2320). Trauma, by contrast, never closes in this way. As Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman note, it is marked by belatedness, fragmentation, and cyclical returns (Caruth 4; Herman 37, 175). What is required, then, is a dramaturgical model that reflects these features rather than pressing them into a classical tragic arc.

Post-traumatic dramaturgy, if it is to be true to experience, must rest on several principles.

First, it needs to use fragmentation and repetition within the plot to register intrusive memories and the ruptures of PTSD (Caruth 4; Herman 175).

Second, instead of a single overarching arc, it should open into a set of interwoven subplots, at times even moving beyond realism, acknowledging that recovery does not follow one path but many—toward retraumatization, resilience, or only partial healing.

Third, it should bring forward the collective dimension of trauma rather than the solitary tragic hero: multiple voices, documentary testimony, and choral forms present the variety of similar stories and the multiplicity of outcomes (Herman 9).

Fourth—and this is the hardest—Aristotle's inevitability of catharsis should give way to openness: to forms of healing and transformation in which pain and renewal remain side by side, with no final resolution.

Finally, post-traumatic dramaturgy should weave clinical knowledge together with theatrical practice, treating performance not only as representation but as testimony—and potentially as a space of healing.

This theoretical model can be imagined as a layered structure. On one level are the clinical stages of recovery outlined by Judith Herman—safety, remembrance and mourning,

reconnection (Herman 155, 175, 207). They mark the survivor's gradual return to the traumatic experience and its integration into a renewed identity. On another level lies the Aristotelian tragic sequence—peripeteia, anagnorisis, catharsis (Aristotle 2320–2321)—which, for centuries, has shaped how suffering is depicted. Post-traumatic dramaturgy overlays these two frames with its own principles: ruptured time set against linear development, a polyphony of testimony instead of the lone hero's voice, renewal and transition rather than closure. In this perspective, performance no longer functions only as artistic representation: it becomes a space of testimony, where personal and collective stories can be spoken and heard, and where transformation is not final healing but a process in which pain and renewal persist together. Therefore, post-traumatic dramaturgy, based on this model, recognizes the fractured and recurring shape of traumatic experience and, at the same time, opens a space for collective witnessing and for the search for paths toward healing.

Chapter 3. Research-Creation Process: From Preparation to Writing the Play

After developing a theoretical framework, I moved on to the next stage—creating a plot and selecting artistic devices capable of reflecting the internal dynamics of trauma. This process involved collecting documentary materials: interviews with soldiers and civilians who had survived amputations and severe injuries, transcripts of helmet-mounted GoPro footage from the front line, and testimonies of civilians who had experienced the horror of war crimes. It gradually became clear that traditional dramatic forms were insufficient: what happens "within" the trauma is inherently fragmented, corporeal, and asynchronous, and it cannot be expressed through classical linear narrative without significant distortions.

Therefore, the play's dramatic form had to be a cross-genre of tragedy, physical theatre, documentary theatre, and epic theatre. The corporeal basis of the plot—the protagonist's altered body image resulting from amputations and blindness—demanded physical theatre, where the actor's body becomes an additional layer of meaning. The influence of theatre companies such as Kidd Pivot (Assembly Hall) and Peeping Tom (Diptych: The Missing Door and The Lost Room) strengthened my confidence that a hybrid, verbally, vocally and plastically rich form allows for the transmission of temporal ruptures, psychic fragmentation, the paradoxical grief of the lost limbs, and, in general, the extreme physicality and emotionality that defines the experience of trauma. Thus, the cross-genre nature of the play became a necessity, stemming from its spirit and objectives.

These conclusions became the starting point for all subsequent practical work, from the formation of the initial plot to the collection of documentary materials and their transformation into stage dialogues, culminating in the choice of language and the living through of my own traumatic experience during the writing process.

3.1 Creating Plot: Structural Integration of Tragedy, Monomyth, Trauma and Recovery

When first plotting the play, I developed a linear structure that allowed me to view the character's story as a whole. The first draft of the plot outlined the protagonist's journey from his pre-war life to his reintegration into society after the trauma, allowing me to see the linear logic of his transformation. The structure of the original plot brought together three main frameworks: the classical model of tragedy as articulated by Aristotle, Joseph Campbell's monomyth, and Judith Herman's three-stage model of psychological trauma and recovery, while also taking into account Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of grief (Kübler-Ross). In addition, the symptom cluster that informed the plot was based not only on Herman's work but also on the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association) and on Bessel van der Kolk's descriptions of trauma's impact on mind and body. This detailed integration enabled me to incorporate the narrative's psychological, mythological, and tragic turning points.

At this stage, the underlying logic of the future play began to emerge: since the hero's physical injuries are irreversible and insurmountable, his journey cannot be about overcoming external obstacles; instead, he has to recover by passing through an internal catastrophe, surviving the post-traumatic experience, and emerging in a renewed form. It became clear that, as the writing progressed, the linear structure would have to be fractured so that the final dramaturgy could become nonlinear, reflecting the repetitive nature of PTSD symptoms and the fragmentation of traumatic memory.

The initial plot presented in Appendix 1 demonstrates how organically the Aristotelian tragic model and the stages of the monomyth fit into the narrative. Herman's three-stage model of recovery and the key symptoms of PTSD—such as disorientation, irritability, memory fragmentation, isolation, and a sense of meaninglessness—fit just as seamlessly. They complement the two previous structures with what they lack: a three-stage recovery process—safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection—together with the horizon of "commonality," that is, the restoration of social bonds and a sense of belonging. The dynamics of Kübler-Ross's stages of grief, although not formally part of the three main frameworks, reflect the emotional logic of trauma and naturally shape its development within the sequence of scenes in the linear plot.

Thus, the initial linear structure became an analytical tool. It allowed me to see that tragedy, the monomyth, the dynamics of grief, the symptoms of PTSD, and the stages of recovery do not compete with one another but instead complement and reinforce one another, allowing the story of trauma and recovery to unfold as a coherent narrative. It also clarified what

additional information—both documentary and theoretical—on trauma, amputations, and the experiences of survivors I needed to gather before beginning to write the play itself.

3.2 Collecting Documentary Materials and Verbatim Testimonies

The play draws on real testimonies of war trauma, which required the psychological context to be as truthful as possible. To accurately convey the protagonist's conditions caused by PTSD, including his memories of combat clashes, I turned to numerous documentary sources. This process became both a research exercise and an act of respect for the members of the military, an attempt to convey their experience as accurately as possible in artistic form. My goal was to depict the unique human qualities and the tremendous strength of those who lived through war and loss. Given the play's theme and context, I needed to ensure that the text echoes authentic voices; that the scenes depicting battles and suffering are not imitations but reflections of the real speech of those fighting for Ukraine's freedom and experiencing trauma. To achieve that, I analyzed a large number of documentary materials, such as:

- Dozens of hours of video footage of actual assaults by the 3rd Assault Brigade, captured with GoPro helmet-mounted cameras, are publicly available on their YouTube channel (AB3 Army).
- Numerous interviews with soldiers, medics, and volunteers (see Works Cited).
- Materials from rehabilitation centers and interviews with paramedics and rehabilitation therapists (see Works Cited).

- Media publications and personal testimonies of injured civilians and children (see Works Cited).

Beyond the horrific affidavits of loss and grief, these materials revealed something definite about trauma – its language. The survivors' narratives fully resonate with Cathy Caruth's notion that "trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche; it is always the story of a wound that cries out" (Caruth 4).

Indeed, the speeches of people who have experienced trauma convey not only the story but the very rhythm of trauma, conditioned by the fragmentation and nonlinearity of memories. It is a pulsating, jagged rhythm, with pauses, fluctuations between silence and bursts of talkativeness, with sharp shifts in emotional states. As Dori Laub observes, "what ultimately matters … is not simply the information, the establishment of the facts, but the experience itself of living through testimony, of giving testimony" (Laub 85). Each documentary testimony is, therefore, not just memory or fixed information but a living process in which speech becomes an act of re-experiencing.

It became apparent that war testimonies are heterogeneous and reflect the varied experiences of those affected. These experiences differ between soldiers and civilians, adults and children. Within the space of war, many types of testimony coexist, revealing both commonalities and apparent differences. This led me to the idea that a combination of different speech registers—the author's own language, frontline jargon, medical terminology, everyday speech, and precise quotes from the media—would create a polyphonic space of the play that reflects the essence of the traumatic events. Furthermore, this would supplement the play with

the imprinted experiences of those who, without being directly involved in warfare, became victims of the war, such as children affected by the bombings. Such documentary evidence should make the play more compelling, connecting the protagonist's fragmented world to real life. As Dori Laub notes, "a chorus of performances and testimonies, does create… a community of singing… which, held together, has an overwhelming testimonial impact" (Laub 279).

Thus, my main task in working with documentary materials was to gather a multitude of voices and intonations, so that a polyphonic space of collective trauma would emerge on stage—where the personal and the collective, the documentary and the poetic, the real and the mythological resonate together.

3.3 Shaping Documentary Language into Dramatic Dialogue

While working on the play, I realized that I couldn't tell a story based on such extensive documentary material without using elements of verbatim. However, simply using documentary dialogue in the text wasn't enough. My personal impression of the actual footage of the 3rd Assault Brigade is "this is hell on earth." Linguistically, this hell is also chaotically verbalized. The lines heard in the actual combat recordings are harsh, often monosyllabic, and loaded with emotion, profanity, or incomprehensible due to their specialized jargon. On the other hand, hospital interviews of the wounded about their injuries are often informational in nature, due to the interviewee avoiding overly emotional descriptions of their experiences. In a dramatic text, such language either kills the scene, making it ineffective, or turns the action into naturalistic

reportage. For example, here is a partial transcript of soldiers' conversations from the 3rd Assault Brigade during combat (Attention! Fragment contains explicit language and battlefield slang!):

> We're going in, we're going in!
>
> Move, move, move, move!
>
> Cover! Cover!
>
> Who the fuck threw the grenade?
>
> Not us!
>
> Not us?
>
> Fuck! Fucking hell! Shut your mouth, bitch! Get the fuck in there, scum!
>
> Aaaaaah!
>
> You alive?
>
> Leg shot, I'm wounded!
>
> Bro — wounded, wounded!
>
> You wounded?
>
> Hide, fuck, come on… do it!
>
> Quiet.
>
> Someone's there.
>
> Get the fuck down in the ditch, damn it!
>
> Whoa!
>
> Pissed off!
>
> I'm gonna go over there now, I'll fucking tear it all apart!

Navigator, what's your status?

Leg shot, fuck — light! (lightly wounded!)

Get to the group, I'm covering this sector here!

…

You wounded? Wounded?

Don't know, something fucked my arm! I feel blood pouring down my back!

…

Faggot!

Piter's fucked, he's coming this way!

Sick of this shit!

Shut your fucking mouth, damn it!

Nice, fuck! Controlled descent, fuck! Cover while I deal with this crap!

Where are they?

Get down there, we'll come to you now!

Yeah.

Got any mags?

Here — AK-12, fuck!

Who wanted it?

Ah, fuck, what the hell are you, idiot?

Still alive, that bastard was!

He says he was alive.

Alive?

Yeah, was.

Take sectors, take sectors, fuck.

That way, that way, damn it.

I’m holding.

Detroit, this is Mutnyy — flushing them out, flushing them out.

We’ll hit ’em with an RPG now, fuck!

RPG, yeah?

Here, fuck!

Run here, now!

He’s down!

This is just one example that shows that it was important not only to quote real testimony but also to translate it into dramatic dialogue.

To achieve this, it was necessary to preserve the authenticity of the speech—its specific words, expressions, and rhythm—while also ensuring that the dialogues provided information, advanced the storyline, and developed characters, making them functional within the plot. Hours of documentary footage were reviewed, from which the most distinctive lines were selected. These were incorporated into the dialogue with minimal changes and interwoven with the author's text, written in a documentary style. Thus, the dialogue in the battlefield scene (see scenes 6 and 23 of the play) sounds more concise and consistent, allowing the reader to follow the unfolding events and the actions of each combatant.

Another example, based on extensive documentary evidence, is the scene in which Nina informs Nicholas about the death of all the fighters in his squad. In reality, such dialogues often sound either dry and formal or, conversely, verbose, overly emotional, and filled with unnecessary explanations. After multiple rewrites, the play retained only the essential core of the dialogue, conveying the horrific essence of the moment:

NICHOLAS. Who?

NINA. All of them.

NICHOLAS. How?

NINA. Direct hit on the pickup.

A long pause in silence.

Suddenly, into this silence, the Nurse enters with a radio broadcasting a football game.

NURSE. Here's your football! When you've had enough, call me.

This was the fundamental task of transforming documentary language into a dramatic one: selecting the most emotional elements, removing everything redundant, and retaining only what conveys meaning, carries emotional weight, and advances the plot. The text should express only the essence of what is happening. Changes in dialogue or between scenes should be contrasted. That's why, interrupting this dialogue, a nurse suddenly enters the scene and, "as if nothing had happened," brings a radio playing. This contrast between something very mundane

and the sudden deaths of several friends creates maximum dramatic tension, revealing one of the most significant contrasts that war creates.

I also wanted to use two additional types of documentary quotes. The first are statements by great thinkers about the necessity of suffering, which I juxtaposed with Nicholas's impossible experience to create a paradox between inherited cultural wisdom and individual pain. I wanted these quotes—juxtaposed with Nicholas's monstrous physical pain—to sound like a meaningless chorus of obsolete voices: philosophical, religious, and aphoristic. The second are the testimonies of Ukrainian children who suffer from the war. These children's statements are juxtaposed with the war itself, reducing it from a historical event to a collective crime against children. Both quotes were intentionally left unaltered to sound as precise as possible.

Thus, the use of documentary language in the play creates a contrast with the coherent, rhythmic authorial text and, at the same time, introduces direct evidence into the plot. Furthermore, the interweaving of the authorial and documentary texts creates a dual dramatic space in which the authorial text reveals the protagonist's inner space and the documentary text displays the real world. The juxtaposition of these two modalities orchestrates a semantic clash between these two poles, emphasizing the contrast between discourses on pain and individual pain itself, between war and its consequences.

3.4 Language and Personal Trauma

While working on the play, I experienced a multitude of complex emotions: fear, grief, horror, survivor's guilt, and helplessness. Sometimes the experiences were so overwhelming that

I could not comprehend what I was feeling. I read the text aloud, trying to understand whether I expressed exactly what I intended and to track my own reactions. This need for self-reflection led me to switch to Russian as the language for writing the play. Although I was born and raised in Ukraine and am fluent in Ukrainian, Russian is my mother tongue. Since childhood, Russian has been my everyday language, the one through which I express my thoughts and feelings. Therefore, in Russian I can most accurately convey my artistic vision through words and rhythm, and thus transmit the emotional content of the text.

Judith Herman argues that a central task of trauma recovery is to reconstruct and tell the story of the experience, so that out of fragmented images and sensations a coherent narrative can emerge and the survivor can reclaim their voice. (Herman 263). For me, working on the play became such a process of rethinking and retelling. It was important for me to connect my personal story to the protagonist's story. I did not fight in the war myself — I am a witness to genocide, a witness to the destruction of my country, a person who has lost several friends and students in the war. I still have my sight, my legs and my hands. How, then, could I make the protagonist's story part of my own? The truth is that I did not have to do anything to "make" it personal; the story did this on its own. At some point, it became clear to me that, while writing, I was experiencing two traumas at once: the protagonist's and my own. I perceived the hero's traumatic experience through my personal lens as a playwright — as if from within, sharing his horror, pain, and despair. Seen through this lens, the text of the play, grounded in documentary evidence, ceased to be simply an artistic work; it became an attempt to capture pain that could otherwise be easily overlooked or repressed.

It was crucial that I had the ongoing support of my therapist throughout this process. In therapy, I was able to discuss safely the emotions and thoughts that arose while working on the play. Paradoxically, my responsibility as a playwright to speak about others' pain gradually allowed me to speak about my own. Dori Laub formulates this very starkly: "The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; … they also needed to tell their story in order to survive" (Laub 78). In my case, writing the play gave me the confidence to verbalize my experiences with my therapist and loved ones. As a result, my personal healing process accelerated, and in this experience I find confirmation of Herman's clinical logic: recovery involves not only establishing safety but also shared witnessing.

When we witness another person speaking about their pain, or when we ourselves speak about someone else's pain, we open up the possibility of speaking about our own. In her analysis of traumatic narratives, Cathy Caruth suggests that one person's trauma is often "tied up with the trauma of another," and that trauma may lead "to the encounter with another, through the possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (Caruth 8). This indicates that the story of trauma is often constructed indirectly, through someone else's story and through figures that allow us to approach what is still directly unbearable. This is precisely the effect I hope my play will have on its audiences — and, by extension, on society: an inner permission to speak more openly about trauma.

Later, when I rewrote the play in English, it was crucial for me to preserve the rhythm and tone in which trauma is voiced; otherwise, not only the text, but the way it is experienced could have changed. Translation studies have long insisted that translation is not simply a transfer of "content", but an engagement with how language sounds, resonates, and moves

through bodies, and in this work that idea became concrete. In practice, I relied less on theory than on my own experience and on my collaboration with Rachel Powles: her careful involvement helped keep the rhythm and intonation of the English version as close as possible to the Russian original.

For me, this became a valuable experience, showing how different languages, even from different language families, can carefully and precisely carry the same emotional shades and the fine textures of relationships. Trauma scholars have shown that trauma affects not only the psyche but also the body, memory, and language, disrupting the familiar bonds between them. The fact that this experience could be carried from one language into another without losing its intensity became, for me, a small indication of the reverse process: a restoration of connections. It also gives me a sense of deep belonging — a personal belonging to a shared human world in which, despite different languages and cultures, we remain capable of recognizing one another through our common values and pains, and of speaking together about our hopes.

3.5 Writing Experience: Limits, Challenges, and Discoveries

Limits

The first draft of the play failed to capture what I intended for the following reasons:

- I tried to tell the hero's story linearly, ignoring the fact that the fragmented and nonlinear nature of post-traumatic memories resists a traditional narrative structure.
- I was writing, trying to make the play engaging for the audience, rather than focusing on artistically expressing the inner reality of trauma.

- I tried to write strictly within the canons of classical tragedy, which imposed an extra framework that constrained my creative freedom.

After the first draft proved unsuccessful, it became clear that the concept required a fundamentally different approach:

- Instead of striving to recreate a reality of trauma, I must question the very idea of realism within the traumatic reality. The world of the play must be fluid and multilayered, reflecting the protagonist's post-traumatic visions.
- It is essential to accept that there is no single, objective reality and that reality itself is the result of a subjective perception of the moment. As Sartre argues, consciousness "exists only to the degree to which it appears… [it] can be considered as the absolute" (Sartre 12). The hero's world, therefore, emerges from his beliefs, fears, and fantasies. Other characters live in realities they create for themselves, shaped by their contradictory worldviews. In essence, they exist in a myth generated by other myths—constantly overlapping, frequently conflicting or mutually exclusive.

This meant I had to create a fragmented, fluid, and contradictory dramatic space in which the text's structure reflected the hero's internal split.

From that moment on, the play took shape. I stopped treating the hero as a central figure of the research and focused on the trauma itself and the phenomenon of inner fragmentation it creates. This approach gave rise to the protagonist, his alter-ego-antagonist, and all the other characters—as well as the play's events, structure, and language.

Challenges

The most challenging idea was to make the text itself another character in the play. It was essential to emphasize the obvious: text is not simply a tool of articulation, but a phenomenon that governs human thought, behaviour, and growth. I wanted to show that text dictates its own terms, seizes power, destroys the mould of common sense, drags the characters into a realm of dangerous conventions, and actually lives its own life.

The question was: how can something immaterial—a phenomenon that exists only as a means of transmitting experience and memory—be transformed into a character present in all the characters simultaneously?

This idea couldn't be realized literally—it's impossible to "act out" a text as if it were a living being distributed among all the characters of the play. But the attempt itself led to a more important discovery: the protagonist’s strength and weakness lie in their words. It is precisely spoken words that can lead to a fatal error or, conversely, provide a way out of a hopeless situation—if not in a mystical, then at least in an ontological sense—or, more precisely, in a pragmatic sense: as acts of speech that alter the reality of the narrative. Therefore, while writing, I kept in mind the text that guides the characters, so that they say not what they really want, but what they have learned to say from the texts they have absorbed throughout their lives.

One line of dialogue that didn't make it into the final version of the play was this: God says to Nicholas, "You ask what happened to you? The text happened to you. For thousands of years, text has been growing through people into this world. Good text transforms into ideas and

actions. Empty text transforms into nothing. Essentially, text only makes sense when it gives birth to something new or destroys the old."

We live in a world where words act as deeds and traps of obligations. Once something is said, it acquires some "materiality." As J. L. Austin notices, there are "some cases and senses... in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something." (Austin 12). As Foucault notes: "Language is 'rooted' not in the things perceived, but in the active subject… We speak because we act, and not because recognition is a means of cognition" (Foucault 315). In this sense, language does not only represent; it acts. Verbally expressed position begins to define us, and abandoning it requires effort and carries consequences. Words we disown don't disappear without a trace: they return, undermining trust, like unfulfilled promises. "'I promise to…' obliges me—puts on record my spiritual assumption of a spiritual shackle" (Austin 4). Thus, every utterance creates its own trap—a web of meanings into which a person inevitably falls.

For me, the text's personification became an internal device rather than a literal statement. This device allowed me to see how the text manifests itself through the protagonist and other characters, and how the characters manifest themselves back through the text. I let words act, influence, and organize the dramatic space, the characters' consciousness, their paths of action, the configuration of relationships, and even the rules of the game itself. Such an approach led me to one of the play's fundamental ideas—the questioning of creation's logic. This is precisely what happens when, at the very end of the play, Nicholas questions the first word that had ever been said.

Discoveries

The first observation is that it is much easier for me to work on a play if I keep a journal of reflections. As I write down my thoughts about what I am going to write, my mind gradually becomes attuned to working on the play. I enter a creative state more quickly, and the text becomes more meaningful and internally coherent.

The second observation is that text needs time to "get going." At the beginning, I write quite a few lines of a dialogue that will later be deleted—but it is through them that I find the rhythm of the conversation and action. This rhythm adds another level of meaning, allowing me to convey the essence of what is happening more clearly.

The third observation is that it was impossible to capture all three models—the hero's journey, the structure of tragedy, and the PTSD model—simultaneously during the writing process. Therefore, I subordinated the plot to the structure of trauma: it dictated the narrative's form, its repetitions, interruptions, and returns. Two other models—the hero's journey and the structure of tragedy—became secondary during the writing. I allowed the text to be fragmented and unpredictable, and only then related it to the canon of tragedy and monomyth's logic. If I had made the narrative linear and perfectly structured, the trauma's chaotic nature would not have fully manifested.

Fourth observation: all the characters, one way or another, are my projections. Seeing through their eyes, speaking in their voices, thinking their thoughts, all while remaining yourself and observing them from a distance, is a challenging task. It's like acting in given circumstances, using the "magic if" while simultaneously putting yourself in the audience's shoes (Stanislavsky

59). This was the most delicate part of the work, requiring inner honesty and attention to the details of perception.

Fifth observation: witnessing the documented suffering of others is unbearable. Pain, either physical or psychological, tends to become repulsive when brought to the public. To give the audience the chance to endure the pain depicted in the play without turning away, I needed to create a distancing and find an artistic form that would authorize such an experience safely. The chorus became a versatile instrument for this distancing: it could speak on behalf of the trauma, be Nicholas's inner voice, and express a collective—and sometimes even an authorial—viewpoint.

The sixth discovery is the contrast between documentary evidence and fiction. The greater the gap between the degree of fiction in one fragment and the reality in another, the less consonant they become. Thus, it was essential to maintain a balance so that the dynamic between the rhythmic authorial text and the rough documentary inserts from the battle would not destroy the sense of truth.

Thus, writing the play became not simply an experience of overcoming literary difficulties, but an exploration of how to speak about trauma in artistic language. As a result, despite the use of three structures—trauma, tragedy, and Campbell's hero's journey—it was the symptomatology of post-traumatic experience that dominated the writing process. The play's form thus came to reflect the very nature of trauma: fragmentary, cyclical, and striving to remain unresolved.

Chapter 4. Creative Component: Full Play Text

Thy Word Be Done

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To the defenders of Ukraine — known and unknown —

those who serve and have served; those who gave their lives; those who keep going despite pain, loss, exhaustion, and silence. The voices in this play are echoes of your voices. This text is a token of remembrance, respect, and your continuing presence.

To my family —

for their patience, warmth, and endless faith in me. You are my home.

Finally, to the children of Ukraine —

your voices are carried here with respect, gratitude, and sorrow. The children's testimonies quoted in this play are drawn verbatim from published reports by UNICEF, BBC News, CNN, and Ukraine.ua. They are reproduced with attribution, in the spirit of remembrance.

The following outlets made these stories available to the world:

– UNICEF, Three years of full-scale war for Ukraine's children (2025)

– UNICEF, Three years of full-scale war: Ukraine's children continue to suffer (2024)

– UNICEF, Childhood under attack (2022)

– BBC News, Their loved ones are missing at war. So these Ukrainian children spend summer together (2025)

– BBC News, Growing up under fire: Ukraine’s children adapt to survive Russia's invasion (2024)

– Ukraine.ua, Seven-year-old gymnast Sasha lost her leg due to a Russian missile attack. Now she is back at competitions (2024)

– CNN, Ukrainian teen shows shrapnel wounds he got while waiting in line for food (2022)

Content Warning

This play contains depictions of war, including violence, injury, and death. It uses authentic military slang and incorporates verbatim testimonies of Ukrainian children, as well as documentary references to combat realities. Some passages may be disturbing. The material is presented with respect and in the spirit of remembrance, not for sensationalism.

Characters

NICHOLAS–BEFORE — Nicholas before the injury, healthy.
NICHOLAS — blind, without arms or legs; Nicholas after a blast injury.
NINA — Nicholas’s girlfriend.
DOCTOR (also God) — Petro Vasylovych.
ASSISTANT (also Death) — Nadiya.
NURSE (also Life) — Zinaida Yegorivna.
ORDERLIES

CHORUS

Six actors (four men and two women) who, in different scenes, embody:

Nicholas’s lost body parts:

LE — Left Eye

RE — Right Eye
LA — Left Arm
RA — Right Arm
LL — Left Leg
RL — Right Leg

Nicholas's comrades — his Squad:

GRAMPS — squad leader
PIKACHU — sniper (female soldier)
BOLT — rifleman
DEMON — rifleman
RED — rifleman and combat medic (female soldier)
KID — FPV drone operator

Figures of Power:

PRESIDENT
PRESIDENT'S ENTOURAGE — five people

TIME

The passage of time in the play is marked by the changing of Nicholas's bandages and the replacement of medical props. The hero gradually approaches discharge from the hospital.

SCENE 1

> *An empty stage. Six hospital beds are arranged in a row. Members of the Chorus lie in the beds, portraying patients. Assistant Nadiya stands, watching the sleeping patients.*

The Doctor enters. He holds a clipboard with paper forms clipped to it.

DOCTOR. On duty?

ASSISTANT (ironically). On eternal duty, Petro Vasylovych. Who would know that better than you?

DOCTOR. For with much knowledge comes much sorrow. Ever tried resting?

ASSISTANT. Who can rest in times like these?

DOCTOR. Well, that's how it is. A human being is just a bunch of diseases and delusions. And our job is—

ASSISTANT (interrupting). To pull a human through the eye of a needle.

The Doctor hands the Assistant a patient file.

DOCTOR. This one gets an exemption.

The Assistant glances at the file, snorts, and hands it back.

ASSISTANT. No exemption for him — hasn't earned one yet. His head is full of delusions.

DOCTOR. "Delusions"… sounds like the name of a small town. "Next station: delusions. Exit on the left. Have your exemption papers ready, document check ahead!"

ASSISTANT. His labs look good. Previous station: Steatosis. Current station: Remission. Bags packed, ready for deployment.

DOCTOR. Steatosis… fatty liver… and in remission — that's a sure death sentence.

ASSISTANT. You could write a dissertation: Health That Kills. Make a splash in medical science. Might even get a Nobel.

DOCTOR. Might even get a prison term. I'm about to deprive a man of his health. Steatosis–cirrhosis — nice rhyme. (Writes, muttering). Primary biliary cholangitis, with ductular proliferation, destruction of bile ducts…

ASSISTANT. "I am the resurrection and the life…"

DOCTOR. "Next station: delusions. Exit on the left."

The Doctor hands her a certificate.

ASSISTANT (smiling). You can't be a real doctor, Petro Vasylovych — I can actually read your handwriting.

DOCTOR. I'm not a doctor — I'm a conductor.

ASSISTANT. You're good with words.

DOCTOR. I put words together, but they change nothing.

ASSISTANT. Everything's been said already.

DOCTOR. Except the main thing. Here's the truth — "sane" and a man stays home, but "delusional" and he's in a trench, dying or losing limbs. Words decide who lives and who dies.

ASSISTANT. I thought you decided that.

DOCTOR. Why would I want that?

ASSISTANT. What about free will?

DOCTOR. Liberty or Death?

ASSISTANT (ironically). I like it!

DOCTOR. Don't you find it strange that this road only has two directions?

ASSISTANT. Convenient, isn't it? Especially if you keep going in circles.

DOCTOR (laughing). And you still expect a decent schedule?

A phone notification sound.

ASSISTANT. Petro Vasylovych, people play with words — not the other way around. You should get some rest.

The Doctor takes a phone from his pocket, reads the message.

DOCTOR. My dear Nadiya, I'd rest — but right now, it's the words playing with us. They're calling us to the ICU. Critical cases will be coming in any minute.

The Doctor and the Nurse leave quickly.

SCENE 2

Nicholas–Before enters.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. The Med Board's decision was typed on cheap yellowish paper. All proper format, with seals. The diagnosis was long — I didn't remember it.
The doctor looked at me with a smirk:
"Go home, Nicholas. Nina's waiting for you there."
Funny, I thought — he even knows about Nina. And suddenly I felt this burning anger inside!
I looked him straight in the eye and said:
"Screw you all! I'm fit!"
I thought he'd get angry, but instead he looked sad, almost awkward:
"Think about it — my word here is law."
The thought of him writing me off made my teeth grind.
"The law's like a car – it turns any way your steer it." I said. "We are the law right now."
He looked even sadder: "That's exactly the point, Nicholas… That's exactly the point…"
"Shady bastard, like a separatist," I thought. "Or maybe he really is one. This place is crawling with those wait-and-sees. The time will come — we'll deal with each one."
Then he put the paper in a folder and calmly said: "If you're fit, you're free to go."
So I went.

Nicholas–Before exits. The Chorus members rise from their beds, scatter across the stage, and lie down as if blown apart by an explosion.

Gradually, a strange ballet begins. The Chorus moves while lying down, their motions sharp, twitchy — like the reflex spasms of severed limbs. They try to lift themselves at times but collapse again. Alongside the movement come the sounds of their voices — at first garbled, fragmented noises and groans. These blend with their bodies' movements into a single pattern of surges and fade-outs, the rhythm of human agony.

As the sound builds, the groans turn into recognizable words. The Chorus members speak or shout at random, sometimes in turn, sometimes overlapping. Certain lines repeat, cycling obsessively.

RA. It hurts!

LL. Shut up!

LA. It hurts!

RL. Shut up!

RA. I'm trying to cope!

LA. I can't grasp what happened!

RA. What if—

RL. Don’t even think it!

RE. Dark.

LE. Yes. Dark.

RA. Mud.

LA. Stench.

RL. So much waste!

LL. Could’ve been a desk job!

RA. Desk job!

EYES (together). Fire. Fire! Fire!

ARMS (together). Fire! Fire! Fire!

RA. My palm! Filthy, torn rags. Mud!

LA. Did it happen? Did it really happen?

RL. Don’t even think it! Shut up! You’ll jinx it!

RA. All because he never crossed himself!

EYES (together). It’s all from God! It’s all from God!

ARMS (together). Yes! Yes! Yes!

RL. It hurts!

LL. I’m trying to cope!

RA. I can’t grasp what happened… tourniquet… windlass…

LA. What if—

RL. Shut up! Don’t even think it!

RE. Dark.

LE. Yes. Dark.

RL. You already said that!

LA. Is it me, or did what happened really happen?

RA. Don't jinx it!

LA. If it happened, there's nothing left to jinx.

LL. I always feared this!

RA. Shut up!

LA. I can't feel him!

RE. Where are we?

RL. Feels like solid ground under me.

LL. Yes. Dirt.

RA. Clay.

LA. Touch me…

RA. Can't. Won't. He didn't give the order.

LA. Where is he? Why isn't he here?

RA. I could really use a cigarette right now!

EYES (together). Shut up!

All fall silent, listening.

RE. Sounds like…

LE. Sounds like…

RL. Sounds like—

LL. Yes, sounds like…

LA. Sounds like he's gone.

RA. Oh…

Pause.

LA. I can't feel him.

RL. Broken link.

RE. Void.

LE. No connection.

RA. How is that possible?

LL. Seems they've taken him from us.

From now on, the Chorus members may rise, move, interact with each other.

Pause.

EYES (together). Who could have taken him from us?

LA. I told you so!

RA. That's impossible!

LEGS (together). Then where is he? Why isn't he here?

Pause.

RE. Without us, he's finished.

LE. Exactly!

RA. What happens now?

LA. If he dies, we'll be reunited!

RA. You can’t wish him dead!

LA. I don’t wish him dead — I wish to be with him again!

RA. Same thing.

LA. No!

RA. Yes!

LA. Don’t argue with me!

LEGS (together). That’s one case where the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is saying!

RA (to legs). She’s always been slower than me!

LA. You’re the one who always rushed ahead!

RA. You’re a slacker. That’s why he never became a musician — you were too lazy to move your fingers!

LA. My tendons were weak — that’s not a flaw, it’s a feature!

LEGS (together). Lucky for us, we’re not arms.

RE. Yeah!

LE. Yeah!

ARMS (together). Lucky? My ass!

LEGS (together). You think it’d be better if we were arms?

ARMS (together). Definitely better.

EYES (together). Yeah!

LEGS (together). Then he’d have four arms and look like some kind of monkey.

ARMS (together). Some kind of monkey?!

RE. Yeah!

LE. Yeah!

LEGS (together). Quiet!

They all freeze. Silence. Everyone listens.

LA. I think his heart just stopped…

Pause. Tension.

RA. There, it's beating again.

RL. Our heart is strong!

LL. It could run a marathon! Thanks to it, he's still alive.

RE. Yeah!

RL. Anyone else would be dead by now.

LE. Yeah!

RA. We're on our own now. What do we do?

EYES (together). Yeah!

RA. What's with all the "yeahs"? Do you even see what's going on?

EYES (together). No!

RA. Same as always — blind, but "yeah"-ing away!

LA. We need to wait for him so we can reunite.

RL. Impossible.

LL. Once we're separated, there's no going back.

RE. Yeah!

LE. Yeah!

RA. Then what do we do?

LA. He doesn't know we're gone yet. He's still asleep. When he wakes up, he'll know.

RE. Yeah!

LE. Yeah!

RL. And then we'll have to go.

LL. But before we go—

EYES (together). Yeah!

RL. Before we go—

RA. What?

LL. We have to say goodbye to him.

> *Orderlies slowly wheel in a hospital bed with Nicholas half-reclining in it. The Chorus freezes, watching. Nicholas's body is without arms and legs; the stumps are neatly bandaged. Tubes lead from his wounds; IVs are attached. His eyes are covered with a blood- and medicine-soaked bandage. His face is mostly hidden under gauze — only his cracked, darkened lips visible. At the foot of the bed, where Nicholas's legs used to be, sits Nicholas–Before.*
>
> *The orderlies position the bed center stage and leave. Nicholas–Before rises. The Chorus members approach Nicholas slowly, carefully, studying his mutilated body.*

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Anesthesia is like censorship — a whole chunk of life is cut out. You come back from nothingness, turning your head like a drunken chicken, clueless about what just happened. Darkness in your eyes, flashes of the last battle in your head. Then you remember exactly what happened — and the horror hits.

> *The Chorus physically echoes the content of Nicholas–Before's monologue according to the director's vision.*

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Words race through your head: stump, cripple, "backpack," torso — all kinds of ugly words. You can't fight them; they're stronger than you. I scream in terror, try to get out of bed, fall somewhere. Someone grabs me in the dark, sticks a needle in me. I scream again, struggling to break free. At some point they win, I go quiet, and completely lose myself. I'm no longer me. I don't know who I am. Now I am him. And I don't know who he is.

Pause.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. He's no longer my past self, and I'm no longer his future self. He can't accept what's happened. In his darkness there's no sense of time — only pain, horror, and a voice screaming from the void: "It's all a dream! This can't be real! This couldn't have happened to me!"

SCENE 3

Suddenly, at the edge of hearing, the sound of a woman's heels clicking. Nicholas–Before and the Chorus freeze. Judging by the sound, the woman is walking in high heels. The steps grow louder, more distinct, then slow, then stop — hesitating. A short pause. The steps resume — first two slow, unsure ones, then quicker, more confident, heading toward the ward.

The Chorus members dash back to their beds, hiding under their blankets. Nicholas–Before, on impulse, takes a few steps toward the entrance.

Nina enters. Nicholas–Before rushes toward her, trying to embrace her. But Nina, not seeing him, walks quickly to Nicholas's bed. She stops abruptly a few steps short, freezes, staring at his mutilated body. Nicholas slowly turns his head toward her. Nina recoils, turns, and heads for the door.

NICHOLAS. Nina…

Nina stops, still facing away. Silent.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. I recognized your footsteps.

Nina stands, trying to steady herself.

NICHOLAS. If you leave, I'll understand.

Nina starts to sob, slowly turns back toward Nicholas. The Chorus throws off their blankets and rushes to Nina, embracing her, trying to comfort her. Gradually, Nina calms in their arms. The Chorus lets her go and returns to their places.

NICHOLAS. Are you still writing your book?

NINA (sniffling). Book?

NICHOLAS. About the girl.

NINA (sniffling, deep breath). No. Why do you ask?

NICHOLAS. I wanted to know how she's doing.

NINA. She… She's in the village, in a beautiful garden with her grandmother. And her father's going to give her a foal.

NICHOLAS. Will he?

NINA. I don't know… Right now, her father's at war. So the book's on hold.

NICHOLAS. He absolutely has to come back and give her that foal.

Pause.

NINA. Lately, I can't squeeze out a single line.

NICHOLAS. No inspiration?

NINA. Everything that comes to mind is something you'd see scrawled on a bathroom stall, not in a children's book.

NICHOLAS. Bathroom stalls aren't really your thing.

NINA. I've got huge potential! I'm full of bathroom-stall words.

NICHOLAS. Then find yourself a stall — first-ever bathroom-stall edition.

NINA (half-smiling). I'm a children's author, not the mother of all swear words.

NICHOLAS. Swear words are the most honest words.

NINA. Mine are ugly. Death wishes and curses. If I say them, I'll turn into an ugly old witch, like in the fairy tales.

NICHOLAS. My head's full of ugly words. Does that make me ugly?

NINA. You're the most beautiful man I know.

NICHOLAS. Yeah, right…

Pause.

NINA. I have to tell you something awful.

NICHOLAS. How awful?

NINA. The worst.

NICHOLAS (half-smiling). Betrayal?

NINA (dead serious). K.I.A.

NICHOLAS. Who?

NINA. Bolt.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Where? When?

NINA. Same battle that got you.

NICHOLAS. The others?

NINA. All right — if you can call it all right.

Pause.

NINA. On Saturday, I went to his funeral. At your cemetery…

NICHOLAS (angrily). Bite your tongue!

NINA. I'm sorry! Damn… I'm sorry…

Pause.

NICHOLAS. And?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. And she saw that the field between the cemetery and the forest on the horizon was gone.

NICHOLAS. And?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Now it's all graves, right up to the forest.

NICHOLAS. And?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. And she wanted to tell you that.

NICHOLAS. And?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. And realized it wouldn't help you.

NICHOLAS. And?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Ask her if she's scared.

NICHOLAS. Shut up.

NINA. I'm sorry, darling, I don't even know why I said that.

NICHOLAS. Because it's true. It's our cemetery.

NINA. I didn't know.

NICHOLAS. Are you scared?

NINA. Scared? No. Worse.

NICHOLAS. How?

NINA. You know, when I was in eleventh grade, we went to Poland, to Auschwitz. There I felt… holocausted. Like I was alive and healthy, but at the same time suffering alongside my great-grandparents.

NICHOLAS. And at our cemetery, you felt holocausted?

NINA. Worse. I feel like I've been buried there fifty thousand times. I look at you, and my arms and legs ache.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. I dream about my arms, legs, and eyes. I dream they're in pain, suffering in a trench, like forgotten children.

NINA. Nika…

NICHOLAS. I want to call out to them, but I can't. I just watch them from a distance, like through clear plastic. How can I even look at them? I don't have eyes. But I see my eyes, and my legs, and my arms.

NINA. I miss you…

NICHOLAS. I'm sorry no one will bury them. No one will give them honours. I lasted as long as I did only because of them. Without them, I'd have died a hundred times already. Now stray dogs will probably eat them. There are lots of stray dogs around the positions. I think the dogs are taking revenge on us.

Pause. Both silent.

NINA. The doctor said I shouldn't stay too long — you need to rest.

NICHOLAS. I'm in pain. Call the nurse, have her give me a shot.

Nina leaves the stage. The Chorus watches her go.

SCENE 4

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (to the audience).
When you go to war, it never crosses your mind it could end like this. Sure, I thought I could get wounded, even killed, but I could never imagine waking up blind, without arms or legs.
Sometimes you brace yourself for something terrible — and something even worse happens. Then again, ready or not — it happens anyway.
As they say in the trenches: "It's a dog's life but in the end you get a Cossack's glory." I keep replaying in my head those last few seconds before the hit, thinking it all could've turned out differently. If I'd been a second late — we'd have just missed that drone. It would've picked someone else — Sergeant, Pikachu, or Demon. At worst, I'd be concussed.
Those are horrible "what if" thoughts, but it doesn't matter anymore. This was the outcome — the most unthinkable, the worst nightmare. My brain never stops for a second until I drop into a short sleep. I sleep from one painkiller to the next, from one wave of despair to another. Then I wake up — and I'm wide awake inside the trap of my own nightmare.

Pause. Nicholas moans in pain.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (continuing). Personally, I think we're screwed. (to Nicholas) We're screwed now, buddy! I'm gone — so who the hell are you?

Pause. Nicholas moans again in pain.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. What are you moaning for? Hey! Who are you? You're the one with no future now! The one people will turn away from! The one they'll pity! The one who'll always be in pain!

Nicholas breathes heavily, moans, jerks his head as he tries to stifle a scream. The Chorus begins to move in a "dance of pain." Nicholas–Before stands still in the middle of it.

RE. "Man is a pupil, pain his teacher." — Alfred de Musset.

LE. "Be patient and tough; someday this pain will be useful to you." — Ovid.

RL. "Pain nourishes your courage. You have to fail in order to practice being brave." — Mary Tyler Moore.

The dance continues. Nicholas swears incoherently.

LL. "He who has no pain has nothing to teach." — Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

RA. "With pain you shall bring forth children." — God.

LA. "Where there is no struggle, there is no strength." — Oprah Winfrey.

NICHOLAS. Nurse! I need pain relief!

RE. "Be patient and tough; someday this pain will be useful to you." — Ovid.

LE. "To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering." — Friedrich Nietzsche.

The dance goes on. No one comes. Nicholas breathes deeply, groans, teeth clenched.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (detached, studying Nicholas). You think of those who were lucky enough to die quickly — no more pain for them. You envy them — why didn't you die?

RA. "Death is not such a serious thing; pain — yes." — André Malraux.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. What is pain for?

LA. "Nothing makes us so great as great pain" — Alfred de Musset.

RL. “Adversity introduces a man to himself.” — Albert Einstein.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. And if you hurt in several places at once? Does that make you several times greater?

LL. “Out of life’s school of war—What does not kill **you** makes **you** stronger.” — Friedrich Nietzsche.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Am I the only one who finds mankind's fate to suffer immoral?

RE. “There is no coming to consciousness without pain.” — Carl Jung.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. For every question, humanity’s brightest minds have an answer. But who can guarantee the answer isn’t crap?

Nicholas screams with all his strength — the scream carries everything: physical torment, aggression, rage, hatred.

SCENE 5

NURSE (offstage, shouting). I’m coming, I’m coming! What’s with all the hollering?

The dance breaks off. The Chorus scrambles back to their beds, suddenly model patients. NICHOLAS–BEFORE steps aside, watching. NICHOLAS is still mumbling through clenched teeth.

The Nurse enters.

NURSE. What, you think you’re the only one in here? They’ve crammed the whole hospital full — beds in the corridors. And on shift tonight it’s just me and Death — who d’you need?

NICHOLAS (through teeth). You.

NURSE. Then bite down and bear it.

She gives him a shot, checks the IV, checks the diaper.

NURSE. Give it a minute — it’ll kick in. What’s your name?

NICHOLAS. Nicholas.

NURSE. I'm Zinaida Yegorivna. (straightening his bedding) You're not my first one like this. They bring in plenty — no arms, no legs, no eyes, no face. Sometimes no dick. And still they live. One fellow, mind you, took his own life — restless soul. You, though — no hands to take it with, so you'll live.

NICHOLAS. I don't want to.

NURSE. No one's asking you. You were meant to live — so live.

NICHOLAS. Why?

NURSE. You're like a newborn — just came into this life and already asking "why?" Who the hell knows why they live?

NICHOLAS. Everyone.

NURSE. Everyone? Oh, aren't your clever! Everyone knows everything! Turn on the TV — blather, blather, blather. Experts, my ass. Then step outside the hospital — filth everywhere. And not just dirt — I mean the way they live. Snapping at each other in queues, on the bus. The quiet ones are no better — they're just fighting in silence. So no — nobody knows a damn thing. If they did, we'd have… what's that word…? Consensus! But instead — it's a bloody mess. That's life here. And they still claim they know why they live. Pfft.

NICHOLAS. And you? Why do you live?

NURSE. I'm gonna give you another shot right now so you stop thinking stupid thoughts. (gives him the injection) There… now sleep.

The Nurse leaves. NICHOLAS, NICHOLAS–BEFORE, and the Chorus remain on stage.

SCENE 6

NICHOLAS–BEFORE starts pacing the stage. At first his steps sound dull, but with each one they grow louder, turning into muted thuds.

The Chorus gets out of their beds and begins moving as if in physical discomfort — flinching, hunching, trying to shield themselves from the rhythmical pounding, which more and more resembles explosions rather than footsteps. Nicholas–Before's steps blend with the sounds of battle: distant blasts, gunfire, echoes of combat.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (speaking in the rhythm of the steps). Concussion — that's trauma from a mechanical, explosive, or shock wave hitting the body without visibly breaking anything. On

the outside you look fine, but inside you're bruised, flattened, scrambled. There's mild, moderate, and severe — like from a blast wave. And there's the kind you get from firing your own weapon, though no one talks about that. You send round after round downrange, and bit by bit, it rattles you apart. A gunner's concussion, not the target's. Like the recoil from a rifle stock — only through your whole body. Boom, boom, boom!

NINA enters. She slowly approaches Nicholas's bed, hesitates for a long moment, then, gathering her courage, gently strokes his head. Nicholas doesn't react — tossing and turning in uneasy sleep, his head shifting restlessly. Somehow, NINA finds herself pulled into his nightmare — seeing, impossibly, what he is seeing.

The Chorus gathers together. Nicholas–Before joins them. They are no longer his severed arms, legs, and eyes. They have become his assault squad — Gramps, Pikachu, Bolt, Demon, Red, and Kid. Exact role assignments are at the director's discretion. In this scene, Kid, the drone operator, should stay somewhat apart from the main group, keeping his distance.

The Chorus moves across the stage like a squad regrouping after a fight.

GRAMPS (breathing heavily). Wounded?

PIKACHU (buzzing with adrenaline). Fuck, I just took one to the head! Helmet's fucked! (feels the kevlar helmet, fingers the bullet-torn earpiece) Son of a bitch… blew the earpiece clean off!

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Pikachu, you fucked up — you're buying the booze when we get back!

BOLT (nodding toward a dead machine-gunner). He was laying it down pretty good. What do you think?

GRAMPS. Why the fuck would I think about him? He's not thinking about anything right now.

Bolt moves past the body in the trench.

DEMON. Bolt — tripwire!

BOLT. Copy!

DEMON (into radio). Kid, congrats on your first! (pause — only static) …Huh.

PIKACHU. Kid's a champ — hit three in one go.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (to Pikachu). Your count?

PIKACHU. Two. Your?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Five.

PIKACHU. Christ, when?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. While you were messing with the machine-gunner.

RED joins them.

GRAMPS (to Red). Weapons?

RED. Nothing worth taking. Couple busted AKs, three RPGs with no rounds. Any wounded?

GRAMPS. Pikachu — light. Concussion.

RED. You good, Pikachu?

PIKACHU. Fine. Just shit myself a little. Your tally?

RED. One.

PIKACHU (grinning). Atta girl.

RED. He was faking it — playing dead. Twitched when I stepped on him.

PIKACHU. Fuck me! Next time — double shot to the head, every one of 'em. No exceptions. (bends over, laughing and gasping) Oh! Adrenaline's kicking in!

GRAMPS. Treeline's ours for now.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. What's the call? Dig in or pull back?

RED. There's a road running alongside it. Don't like it.

PIKACHU. Best road's the one home.

The whistle of an incoming mortar. A blinding flash — then chaos.

Close-quarters trench fighting erupts — a blend of ballet and physical theatre. Movements repeat mechanically, obsessively, like a stuck loop. Time skips forward and backward. The squad moves as an unfeeling machine, killing and surviving by reflex. Lines repeat like a skipping record. Nicholas, trapped in his nightmare, twitches and

groans — his torso, head, and shoulders caught in the phantom battle. NINA stays beside him, a helpless witness.

Direction is wide open — but the more compulsive, destructive, and terrifying, the more it captures the war's absurdity and madness.

GRAMPS. Fuck! Bastards!

PIKACHU. Grenade!

Explosion.

RED. Where?!

PIKACHU. Seven o'clock!

Explosion.

BOLT. Ahh! Shit! I'm hit!

GRAMPS. Bastards at seven! Battle order!

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Move! Seven o'clock! Fuck!

PIKACHU. Bastards on the parapet!

GRAMPS. Right trench, hold it!

PIKACHU. Right trench! Right! Bastards on the parapet!

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Seven o'clock, hold it! They're coming!

BOLT. Aaghhh! Fuck! Arms out! Tourniquet!

GRAMPS (rushing to Bolt). Pikachu, hold the right!

DEMON. Bastards at nine!

BOLT (thrashing). Aghhh! Fuck!

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (into radio). Kid! Kid! Where are they? Over!

KID'S VOICE (radio). Three of 'em, ten o'clock, in the field.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (into radio). Where the fuck were you?!

KID'S VOICE. Reloading. Two more, three o'clock, behind the burned-out IFV.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Kid, take out that IFV — we're dry!

Explosion.

KID'S VOICE. Five in the right trench. Three left trench. Four more at seven o'clock. Two in front of you, behind the IFV!

GRAMPS. Pikachu, stay with Bolt — cover left! Nika, with me — hold the right! Red — seven! Demon — the BMP! Easy — 360 perimeter!

RED. Demon, reloading!

DEMON. Bastards! Bastards pushing up, nine o'clock!

GRAMPS. Kid, where is that FPV for the IFV?!

KID'S VOICE. Thirty seconds out.

GRAMPS. Fuck! Hold the line!

Explosion — the burned BMP blows apart.

PIKACHU. Kid, hell yeah!

KID'S VOICE. Two down!

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. More in the right trench! Fuck! Who's on the left — cover that shit!

BOLT. Seven o'clock, they're coming in hard!

GRAMPS. Bolt, status?

BOLT. Fuck knows — I'm fading…

GRAMPS. Hold positions, 360!

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (into radio). Kid, what's on the right?

GRAMPS. Hold, boys, hold! We've got this!

PIKACHU. What now, bastards?! This is our treeline!

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (into radio). Kid, how many on the right?

The rising whine of an enemy FPV drone — then impact. Explosion. The blast wave throws everyone across the stage.

Nicholas cries out, thrashing in bed, nearly toppling over — but NINA grabs him, holding him up.

Another drone scream. Another explosion.

Blackout.

The sounds of close combat, incoming mortars, and detonations in the dark. Voices shouting in chaos:

GRAMPS. Tourniquets! More tourniquets! Tighten the strap, stop the slack!

PIKACHU. This is fucked!

RED. We're done…

GRAMPS. Pulse is there! Pikachu, Demon — cover us!

Gunfire, explosions, screams of pain.

RED. It's no use.

GRAMPS. Shut it! Got Nalbuphine left?

RED. Yeah.

GRAMPS. Give it.

RED. Careful!

Gunfire stops. Somewhere in the dark, someone dies — whimpering, mumbling incoherently.

DEMON. Pulled back — we've got a two-minute window.

PIKACHU. Screw it…

DEMON. No screwing it — we're moving.

GRAMPS. Grab him.

PIKACHU. Christ, the legs…

RED. It's pulp.

PIKACHU. And the arms?

RED. Can't see shit…

GRAMPS. Check the tourniquet!

PIKACHU. Fuck… Bolt's gone. Bolt, you can't be dead…

GRAMPS. Shut it! On three — lift! One, two, three!

Nicholas screams long and hard in the dark — until the scream cuts off and only the battle remains.

Gradually, the fight fades. Slowly, light returns.

SCENE 7

Only NINA and NICHOLAS on stage.
NICHOLAS is breathing hard, trembling.
NINA holds his neck and shoulders, letting him feel she's there.
She slowly pulls her hands away as he begins to calm down.

NINA. I'm scared.
I feel so small… so helpless.
I can't imagine — how is this even possible?
How did you get through it?
How do you live like this, day after day?
Forgive me — I used to get angry that you never told me anything.
But now I know — you can't.
There aren't words for this.

NICHOLAS. Words are crap.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. You know why they say “KIA” or “WIA”?

NINA. No.

NICHOLAS. So they don’t have to say “shot in the head, skull split open, brains falling out in chunks.”
Or “blown to pieces by an FPV drone.”
Or “scattered by a mine in a twenty-meter radius.”
Or “turned inside out into bloody pulp by a grenade stuffed under a flak vest.”
Or “burned to a black, twisted mummy.”
Or—

NINA. Stop…

NICHOLAS. —Or “crawling with no legs.”
Or “full of holes, bloody foam bubbling from the lungs.”
Or “light — lost fingers and half a hand to shrapnel.”

NINA. Please… stop!

NICHOLAS. Words like to be pretty — politically correct.

NINA. I’m so sorry…

NICHOLAS. Me too. I’d cry, but all I can do is scream.

NINA. Then scream.

NICHOLAS. I’m soaked in hate. I want to kill everyone.

NINA. Even me?

NICHOLAS. You know what “the situation is serious but under control” means?

NINA. I guess… when it’s bad, but not hopeless?

NICHOLAS. It means “we’re totally fucked.” When your five thousand are down to a hundred — and you’re next. And nobody gives a shit.

NINA. Darling…

NICHOLAS. No one cares! You don't know, you don't want to know! We're dying by the thousands out there so you can breathe in peace here!

NINA. Nika, please…

NICHOLAS. Did you fuck anyone?

NINA. What?

NICHOLAS. While I was on the line — did you fuck anyone?

NINA. Who?

NICHOLAS. You tell me.

NINA. No.

NICHOLAS. "No, I won't say," or "No, I didn't"?

NINA. No, I didn't.

NICHOLAS. Liar.

NINA. I'm not lying.

NICHOLAS. Come on! Why can't you just say it?

NINA. I didn't sleep with anyone!

NICHOLAS. Everyone sleeps with someone.

NINA. Nika — you've lost your mind.

(NICHOLAS says nothing.)

NINA (clearly, each word). I. Did. Not.

She turns and walks out.

Pause.

SCENE 8

NICHOLAS–BEFORE enters, clapping slowly and sarcastically.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Well… you are quite the diplomat!

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Who the hell are you?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Don't you recognize me?

NICHOLAS. Me?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. You can see me, right?

NICHOLAS. I can see…

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. And how can you see me if you don't have eyes, huh? Exactly. I'm inside your head. I'm you — before.

NICHOLAS. Before what?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Before all this. So? How do you like me?

NICHOLAS. What do you mean?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Well — I've got arms, legs, blue eyes, confident moves, easy stride. Do you like me?

NICHOLAS says nothing.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. I like me. But here's the thing — you took me from myself. Now you — meaning me — are a stump of a man who can't even wipe his own ass.

NICHOLAS. I'm not you.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. The problem isn't that you're not me. It's that I'm you. And I'd rather not be you. I'd rather everything stayed the way it was.

NICHOLAS. Looks like it's not going back to the way it was.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Looks like it's not going back.

NICHOLAS and NICHOLAS–BEFORE (together). What are you going to do?

They both laugh, but without joy.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. I don't have much choice — I'm just a figment of your imagination, a persistent memory. All I can do is hate you and remind you who you could've been if you hadn't gone to war.

NICHOLAS. A draft-dodger?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (laughs bitterly). You could've stayed me — lived a full life, travelled, played sports, loved Nina. But no — you had to be a hero! You were already good, but you wanted to be more of a hero, so you joined the assault unit. You had a hundred chances to get me killed with your heroics, but you kept getting lucky. How many brothers-in-arms have you lost in the last year? You really thought your luck would last forever? What did you think you were? Some kind of chosen one? You naïve little shit — you've taken away everything I loved.

NICHOLAS. You're the one who went to the recruitment office, not me.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Because it was the right thing to do!

NICHOLAS. So you did the right thing?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. You're an asshole.

NICHOLAS. Then you shouldn't have signed up. You could've gotten a deferral, sat it out at home.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. While others fought?

NICHOLAS. Then you'd still have your arms, legs, and eyes.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Go to hell! This is all your fault! You should've left the country and just donated money!

NICHOLAS. You serious?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. For me! For Nina!

NICHOLAS. Gramps and Pikachu wouldn't understand.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. That's no excuse for shitting yourself!

NICHOLAS. You did the right thing. You're a triathlon master, great stamina, reflexes. Anyone else in your place wouldn't have lasted a week. You lasted more than a year.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. I'd have lasted longer — if you hadn't gone charging into the hottest hellholes.

NICHOLAS. Hellholes? So Gramps, Bolt, Pikachu — they shouldn't have gone either? Or just me?

Pause.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. You could've sweet-talked your way into staying back at the command post.

NICHOLAS. While others were on the line?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. No one would've said a word.

NICHOLAS. You'd have been the first to give me shit for it.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. And now I'm the first who wants you dead. Already picked who's going to help you?

Pause.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Cat got your tongue? Believe it or not, I know what you're thinking.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. I didn't go looking for hell — hell came to where I lived in peace.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. And? How's it feel?

NICHOLAS. Learning the new reality.

Pause.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. You took Nina from me.

NICHOLAS. You took her from me.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. I hate you.

NICHOLAS. Right back at you.

SCENE 9

The DOCTOR enters.
NICHOLAS–BEFORE goes quiet, steps aside, sits on one of the beds.
The DOCTOR comes up to NICHOLAS's bed, studies him, adjusts something on the patient monitor.

DOCTOR. Hello, Nicholas. How are you feeling?

NICHOLAS. It hurts.

DOCTOR. Painkillers last about two hours. If it gets bad sooner, call out — the nurse will give you another shot.

NICHOLAS. Thanks.

DOCTOR. My name's Petro Vasylovych. I'm your attending physician. I'll be checking on you several times a day.

NICHOLAS. Sounds like attending is all you can actually do.

DOCTOR. Well… we can't sew your arms and legs back on. My job is to help you recover. Once your stumps heal, we'll send you to rehab… get you fitted with prosthetics…

NICHOLAS. Prosthetics… (dry laugh) Like Pinocchio?

DOCTOR. It's the 21st century — no wooden legs for you. You'll have state-of-the-art bionics. You'll be able to walk, pick things up.

NICHOLAS. And see?

DOCTOR. Sight's not restorable yet — but I'm sure in ten, maybe fifteen years, they'll have retinal implants.

NICHOLAS. Fifteen years?

DOCTOR. Maybe sooner.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. A blind Pinocchio.

DOCTOR. I know it's hard right now. Believe me — it'll get easier.

NICHOLAS. I'll get used to it.

DOCTOR. You could put it that way.

NICHOLAS. Tin Man.

DOCTOR. If anything, carbon–titanium.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. I want euthanasia.

DOCTOR. It's illegal in this country.

NICHOLAS. I can pay well.

DOCTOR. Nicholas, I can't even imagine what you're going through. I'm deeply sorry. But believe me — medicine's moving forward, progress doesn't stop…

NICHOLAS. Progress?!

Nicholas starts laughing — the laugh snowballs into a loud, almost manic burst. The DOCTOR watches in silence until it dies down.

NICHOLAS (through the laugh). Oh, there's progress that never stops — thermobarics that roast people in trenches to ash in under a minute. AI drones — those are something. They hunt their targets, and if there's more than one, they pick the more expensive one. On the line, there are more drones in the sky than people on the ground. We've got real cyberpunk out there! The drones blast people, vehicles, and other drones! Sometimes it feels like they're fighting their own war. Sure, we're in it too, but mostly we're just mopping up whoever's left. Pretty soon, every soldier will get his own personal drone assigned to kill him — now that's progress! And in between all that progress, it's just animals blowing up, shooting, cutting other animals, knee-deep in shit, in holes dug by hand — just like a hundred years ago!

Long pause.

DOCTOR. Why did you turn down the exemption?

NICHOLAS. How do you know about that?

DOCTOR. I remember you well. I'm the one who diagnosed you with cholangitis.

NICHOLAS. But I don't have cholangitis. I've got steatosis in remission.

DOCTOR. I put down "cirrhosis." You'd have been written off. No army. You'd still be living a peaceful life, travelling, loving your girlfriend, raising kids.

NICHOLAS. Looks like I missed my chance.

DOCTOR. Why? I want to understand.

NICHOLAS stays silent. The Chorus — his lost arms, legs, and eyes — stir restlessly, rise from their beds, some drifting closer. NICHOLAS starts to sob, holding it in.

NICHOLAS. Where are my legs? My arms? My eyes?

DOCTOR. I don't know.

NICHOLAS. Have you seen them?

DOCTOR. No. They brought you in without them.

NICHOLAS. Then they're still out there… in that treeline… in the trench…

DOCTOR. Probably.

NICHOLAS begins to cry.

DOCTOR. I'm so sorry.

NICHOLAS. Someone needs to go get them! Please — call the guys, maybe they can still be found! Please! I'm begging you! I can't be without them!

DOCTOR. I'm sorry. It's been days. There's almost nothing left to find.

NICHOLAS. But they're there! They're without me! They'll be lost without me!

DOCTOR. I'll see what I can do.

NICHOLAS. Please! I'm begging you!

DOCTOR. Yes… I'll try.

The DOCTOR exits.

SCENE 10

NICHOLAS is crying in bed. The Chorus begins to move, speak, sing — each member living through the loss with him in their own way. The nature of the Chorus's sound is left to the director: they may speak in unison, overlap, or deliver lines individually.

CHORUS.
Looks like you're on your own now.
We're gone.
We can't help you anymore.

RA. We can't stroke your cheek.

LA. Ruffle your hair.

LEGS: We can't take you for a walk through the city.

EYES. We can't read you books or show you films.

CHORUS.
Without us, you've shrunk so small…
Like a newborn child.
Light, helpless.
You make us want to pick you up and rock you to sleep.
You're back in a diaper.
In a bed that looks like a crib.

You can't see, but you can cry all you want.
A baby cries out of pain and fear
because someone took away the warm, safe world they knew.
A new world is always painful and frightening.

You were born.
You died.
And you were born again.
Welcome to your new life, baby!

NICHOLAS (weeping). No! No! I don't want this! Not without you! I wish I'd died! I want to die! Why did they pull me out? What the hell will become of me?!

CHORUS.
Cry, boy, cry!
You're still so young.
You were healthy, you were beautiful —
and they took your arms, your legs, your eyes.

Does that make you sick and ugly now?
Your body has changed — your life will be completely different.
You'll have to learn everything all over again,
as if you never existed before,
as if the old you died —
left to rot in that hole with us.

We lay there alone, scattered, longing for you.
Helpless — unable to take care of each other.
Hands couldn't meet palm to palm, in the namaste you loved.
Legs couldn't tangle together for support.
Eyes couldn't look to the horizon.

We lay there, without you, in the trench.
Then came the rain.
Then a sunny day.
Then another fight.

All around us, people fell and died.
Drones hunted them down.
Gunfire and explosions, over and over.

Near us fell someone else's legs and arms.
Even someone's head rolled off the parapet into the trench.

When a kamikaze drone hits a person, the person disappears —
turned into a mess of bone and meat —
and their arms and legs are scattered far apart,
each one longing for the man they once served.

We lay there for a long time.
When it all went quiet, the dogs came.
Then the crows.

They feasted.
Swallowing us, choking on us.

More than anything, we wanted to be back with you —
to be part of you again,
to hug your girl,
to play guitar,
to jump step to step,
to blister your hands changing a flat tire,
to get soaked in the rain splashing through puddles,
to watch the sky change colours before sunset over your favourite river.

But the crows and dogs didn't care.
They tore us apart, choked on us.
They even ate the face from the severed head.
It still had a nose — probably smelling the stench as they ate it.

NICHOLAS sobs.
The Chorus returns to their beds.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE speaks over the sound of NICHOLAS's crying.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE.
I remember, one April, years before the war — I was standing at the very top of the Colosseum, looking down at the arena. Partly restored, but you could still see the underground corridors where gladiators waited to fight, celebrated victory, or died from their wounds.
I went down to the restored section of the floor. Stood almost dead center, feeling like an ant in a giant's palm.
What struck me was the mismatch in size — the arena felt too small, the stands enormous. Over fifty thousand people came to watch men kill each other.
I stood there on that empty floor and felt the stare of a greedy, drinking, betting crowd, my life given to them for sport.
I left quickly, never finished exploring the Colosseum.
At Largo Corrado Ricci, I sat at a table at Angelino ai Fori — since 1947. Ordered pasta, coffee, and this thick, hot orange liqueur they serve in clear tea cups… tastes like tangerine… what's it called? Can't remember.
I waited for my pasta, sipping, watching well-dressed people pass by, thinking: My grandmother was born over a hundred years ago, just two generations before me. A thousand years is only ten, fifteen generations.
I was certain people hadn't changed much — and that, given the chance, they'd still gladly watch each other kill.

SCENE 11

Nicholas gradually calms down. A nurse enters, approaches the bed, and starts preparing to change his IV bag.

NURSE. Crying's good. Crying's better than holding all that bitterness inside.

NICHOLAS. Bitterness?

NURSE. Better than bitterness.

NICHOLAS (smirks). Better be better than your bitterness.

NURSE. Ha! You're joking — that's good…

The nurse swaps the IV bag, connects the line to a fresh one, then injects an extra dose of medication into it with a syringe.

NICHOLAS. Zinaida Yegorovna, can you give me a shot that'll make me fall asleep and never wake up?

NURSE. Wrong department for that, sweetheart.

NICHOLAS. I'll pay.

NURSE. Oh, will you now. And what'll you pay with?

NICHOLAS. Money.

NURSE. Nobody pays for that with money.

NICHOLAS. Then with what?

NURSE. With life.

NICHOLAS. How's that?

NURSE. Just like that.

NICHOLAS. I've got no life.

NURSE. Oh, is that so!

The nurse checks Nicholas's diaper.

NURSE. Alright, let's prop you up a bit…

She does what's needed.

NURSE (tossing the used diaper into a special bag). Look at all that life still in you!

NICHOLAS. Not funny.

NURSE. Why not? You eat, and everything else comes out — that's life. We're talking — that's life. Your girl loves you to bits, comes to see you every day — that's life! Petro Vasylovych said that once you're better, he'll send you to rehab — more life! Don't listen to what other people say. Half the country's full of so-called experts — don't live themselves, and don't let others live.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Is it morning or evening now?

NURSE. Evening. Why?

NICHOLAS. Do you have a radio here?

NURSE. We do. Want me to bring it?

NICHOLAS. If you could.

NURSE. Why not. Let me finish the injections, change the diapers, and I'll bring it. You want music?

NICHOLAS. Yeah. Or football. Or the news.

NURSE. Music or football, sure. News — no.

NICHOLAS. Why not?

NURSE. What's the point? They lie about everything.

NICHOLAS. How do you know?

NURSE. You know how long I've been around? I've seen a lot in my time. The world's changed a hundred times, but in the news — they lied then, they lie now. They're not there to tell you the news, they're there to mess with your head. You know that better than I do.

NICHOLAS. What makes you think so?

NURSE. Well, if your head hadn't been messed with, you wouldn't be here!

NICHOLAS. I went on my own.

NURSE. That's what you think. I say a person on his own wouldn't want to kill another person.

NICHOLAS. They started it.

NURSE. Uh-huh. Just like in school — someone starts it, both end up with bloody noses and both get detention.

NICHOLAS. What would you have done in my place?

NURSE. How should I know? I've always stayed in my own place. Feels right to me. I'm not even retiring — I'll work as long as God wills it.

NICHOLAS. God? You think He's real?

NURSE. Of course! How could there be no God? Where else would everything come from? Just popped out of nowhere?

NICHOLAS. I don't know.

NURSE. If you don't know, don't say! These days everyone's yapping away: "Blah-blah-blah, blah-blah-blah!"

NICHOLAS. If God exists, how does He allow… all this?

NURSE. Ha! You really think God's some kind of daddy with a belt, smacking the hooligans' asses?

NICHOLAS. Then who is He? What's the point of Him if, in the world He made, kids die, old folks, women…?

NURSE (taken aback). That's not God's doing — it's people. People kill, rape, lie, steal.

NICHOLAS. And God?

NURSE. God's the measure of all things. Either God is in a person, or He's not. And a person without measure isn't a person at all. Alright, I'll get going. You rest, and I'll bring you that radio with the football a bit later.

The nurse leaves.

SCENE 12

The medication begins to take hold. Nicholas's breathing slows, his pulse eases, his muscles loosen.

On stage, like a vision, Nina appears. She does not move toward Nicholas as he is now, but toward his former self — Nicholas–Before. From the beds, Nicholas's Arms, Legs, and Eyes rise and rush toward Nina.

A dance-memory begins, with Nina as the central figure of the choreography. This is the dream of a body trying to remember who it once was — back when it could still feel, still move, still be whole. Nina is not merely the object of Nicholas's passion — she is the embodiment of his unconscious longing to be complete again, fully alive.

The Chorus acts not only as Nicholas's body parts, but also as manifestations of himself from different moments of his past life with Nina.

Suddenly, the space is torn apart by the sharp, unpleasant jingle of the evening news broadcast. The dance breaks off. Nina runs off stage.

SCENE 13

In an instant, the Chorus and Nicholas–Before regroup. They are no longer Nicholas's body parts, but an organized entourage, with the PRESIDENT at its center.

CHORUS (obsequiously). Mr. President, Mr. President — over here!

One actor plays the President, the rest play members of the entourage. The lines are divided among them at the director's discretion; the President may be addressed by one member or several.

PRESIDENT. Where's our hero? Ah, there he is! You look magnificent, soldier! An Atlas! A Goliath!

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. David…

PRESIDENT. Right, David! Such mighty heroes we have! And why? Because we are a mighty nation, with a mighty president, mighty managers making mighty decisions! And they said the currency would crash, there'd be no war! War is the economy! Grants! Corruption!

ENTOURAGE MEMBER (meaningful look). Mr. President…

PRESIDENT (suddenly grave). A terrible, terrible war! And we say a mighty "no" to corruption! We're sawing away at corruption every day — till the shavings fly! While our heroes are on the front lines, we're busy covering our… backlines.

ENTOURAGE MEMBER (grimacing). Mr.…

PRESIDENT. Yes, yes, I know I'm the president! And who are you? Well? Answer!

ENTOURAGE MEMBER (flustered). Me? I'm your speechwriter.

PRESIDENT. And where's my speech, huh? Why am I improvising here? I'm not some schmuck — I'm the president of this country!

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. Fighter of Corruption!

PRESIDENT. Can one be president without stealing? A rhetorical question!

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. But you managed it!

PRESIDENT. And where's your proof? Show me proof, then we'll talk.

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. Mr. President, we came to pay our debt to the heroes.

PRESIDENT. I don't owe anybody anything! Clear?

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. Sorry, wrong choice of words — we came to honor the heroes.

PRESIDENT. You came to honor the heroes, and me? Why am I here?

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. You also came to honor the heroes!

PRESIDENT. Then say it right: "We all came to honor the heroes together!"

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. Without the "together."

PRESIDENT. Fine. "We all came to honor the heroes." That it?

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. Yes.

PRESIDENT. Good. Mighty. And then what?

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. Here's the award. (hands him a box) Present it.

PRESIDENT. Where are the heroes?

ENTOURAGE MEMBER (pointing at Nicholas). Here.

PRESIDENT. Ah! Goliath!

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. David.

PRESIDENT. Yes, David. But why only one? Don't we have more heroes?

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. This is the ICU. The rest are in other wards.

PRESIDENT. You couldn't gather them all together? It would be mighty, media-worthy: "The President and His Heroes."

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. We'll shoot you with each of them separately, then make a highlight reel.

They pretend to set up for photographing the award ceremony.

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. We're ready — present the award.

PRESIDENT. "Present the award" — what does that even mean? What about my speech? I need to deliver a mighty speech! I can't just hand it over like that!

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. We'll lay down the music later.

PRESIDENT. You'll lay a pig in my path later! What am I supposed to do now, without music?

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. We can sing!

The Chorus begins to sing and march. The President, holding the box, approaches Nicholas's bed.

CHORUS.

You dump your girl
You get your gun
Your uniform
And ammo!
You feel so high!
But then you die.
Your money goes to mama.

The President takes the medal out and pins it to Nicholas's pajama top, then suddenly freezes in confusion.

CHORUS.
You killed a lot
You ended plot
Of many of those Bastards
From now on
You buried alone
You off to meet your master.

PRESIDENT. Stop!

Everyone freezes.

PRESIDENT. Where's the hand?

ENTOURAGE MEMBER (alarmed). He has no hands.

PRESIDENT. What do you mean "no hands"? I need to shake a hand for the cameras!

ENTOURAGE MEMBER (even more alarmed). He has no hands, no legs, no eyes.

PRESIDENT. Then what the hell am I supposed to shake?

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. Pat him on the head, fatherly-like. It'll look good on video.

PRESIDENT. I don't want it to look good — I want it to look mighty, you idiots!

ENTOURAGE MEMBER. It will look mighty, I promise.

PRESIDENT. Fine, screw it. Ready?

Everyone prepares to shoot. The President, smiling warmly, pats Nicholas on the head in a fatherly way. Camera shutters click.

PRESIDENT. Enough?

ENTOURAGE MEMBERS (overlapping). That was mighty!

The President steps back from Nicholas; someone hands him a handkerchief. He carefully wipes the hand that touched Nicholas's head. Without another word, the procession leaves the stage. Nicholas is left utterly alone.

SCENE 14

NICHOLAS. God! Hey! Someone told me recently that You exist! Do You really exist?

Silence.

NICHOLAS. If You really exist, then You can hear me!

Silence.

NICHOLAS. If You can hear me, why are You silent?

Silence.

NICHOLAS. I know why You're silent — You're ashamed!

Silence.

NICHOLAS. You're ashamed because You're a coward!

Silence.

NICHOLAS. You're just like my father! Left me and Mom with no money, no home, disappeared for twenty years, and then, at Mom's funeral: "Forgive me, son, I'm so ashamed!" Ashamed?! Mom carried everything on her own, I worked from sixteen just so we could scrape by. I don't give a damn if you're ashamed! Shame's too cheap to buy your way out!

Silence.

NICHOLAS. God! How about I say a prayer? Maybe if I say "I believe," You'll give me back my arms and legs — and my eyes! You make the blind see, don't You?

Nicholas recites the prayer loudly:

NICHOLAS. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and unto ages of ages. Amen.”

The Doctor enters.

DOCTOR. Do you forgive your debtors, Nicholas?

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Petro Vasylovych?

DOCTOR. You didn’t answer my question.

NICHOLAS. I wasn’t asking you.

DOCTOR. Are you sure?

NICHOLAS. You’re not God. God doesn’t exist.

DOCTOR. But you learned that prayer as a child.

NICHOLAS. There is no God!

DOCTOR. And if you’re wrong?

NICHOLAS. I’m not wrong.

DOCTOR. Never, ever?

NICHOLAS. Why are you here?

DOCTOR. I thought you called me.

Nicholas laughs.

NICHOLAS. I called God, and you showed up.

DOCTOR. Well, sorry. I’m not sure what else I can offer you. Another draft exemption? But what’s the guarantee you won’t refuse again?

NICHOLAS. What can you offer me?

DOCTOR. Eternal life.

NICHOLAS (laughing). Seriously? You joking?

DOCTOR. You don't believe in eternal life?

NICHOLAS. I believe in death. I believe in quick death. I believe in slow and painful death. I believe in hundreds of deaths I've seen with my own eyes.

DOCTOR. Sounds like you've seen too little life.

Nicholas is silent, unsure what to say. The Assistant, Nadiya, enters.

ASSISTANT (smirking). Seems he believes in me more than in you.

DOCTOR. He's seen you too often.

ASSISTANT. Unlike you, I come for everyone.

DOCTOR. That's no credit to you.

ASSISTANT. True.

Pause.

ASSISTANT. When?

DOCTOR. His story isn't over yet.

ASSISTANT. He is the story. From now and forever.

DOCTOR. I want to give him a chance.

ASSISTANT. Then I can't take him.

DOCTOR. Concerned?

ASSISTANT. It's unfair.

DOCTOR. He was one of your reapers. Are you fit to speak of fairness?

ASSISTANT. Why him?

DOCTOR. Because he needs me more than anyone.

ASSISTANT. He doesn't believe in you!

DOCTOR. That's what he claims.

ASSISTANT. But?

DOCTOR. A person doesn't feel the need for something that doesn't exist for them.

ASSISTANT. You are love itself!

DOCTOR. Nothing less — and that's more than enough.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Who are you people?

ASSISTANT. Right now, it should matter more who you are.

NICHOLAS. Am I dead?

ASSISTANT. Depends on what you call death.

NICHOLAS. Death doesn't care what we call it.

ASSISTANT. No — it does care.

NICHOLAS. And how would you know?

ASSISTANT (commanding). Open your eyes! You. Know. Me!

Pause.

NICHOLAS. You came for me?

ASSISTANT. If you wish, I'll take you.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. No.

ASSISTANT. Not so long ago, you wanted to sleep and never wake up.

NICHOLAS. I don't want that now.

ASSISTANT. You like this life?

NICHOLAS. It's my life.

ASSISTANT. You call this life?

NICHOLAS. I live with what God gives.

ASSISTANT (to the Doctor, amused). He's actually a sweetheart. I think I see why you chose him.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Am I going to die?

DOCTOR. Death comes to everyone one day, but life doesn't end with death.

NICHOLAS. And what does it end with?

DOCTOR. Life doesn't end. Most of life exists beyond the body.

NICHOLAS. I wish I could learn to live beyond what's left of my body.

DOCTOR. Then you must become truly alive.

NICHOLAS. How?

DOCTOR. Take up your cross, and follow Me.

NICHOLAS. Without legs?

DOCTOR. What is that to you? You — follow Me.

The Doctor heads toward the exit. Nicholas starts laughing.

NICHOLAS (ironically, after him). My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?

Nicholas laughs. The Doctor leaves without looking back.

SCENE 15

Nicholas falls silent, sensing the Assistant's gaze on him.

NICHOLAS. I've always felt your eyes on me.

ASSISTANT. My offer still stands.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Suppose I agreed… How would you do it?

ASSISTANT. I have many ways. Which do you prefer?

NICHOLAS. My fantasia only stretches as far as euthanasia.

ASSISTANT (grimacing with displeasure). Fantasia—euthanasia. A straight rhyme. Boring.

NICHOLAS. Can you offer something more spectacular?

ASSISTANT. I thought you'd be the one to offer. Lately, I've been plagued by a deadly boredom.

NICHOLAS. I thought "deadly boredom" was a metaphor.

ASSISTANT. Much of what people call metaphor is more than literal.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Is it hard for you?

ASSISTANT. In what sense?

NICHOLAS. Do you get tired?

ASSISTANT. What do you mean?

NICHOLAS. So many people die every day. It must be exhausting — killing so many.

ASSISTANT. I don't kill anyone.

NICHOLAS. How's that?

ASSISTANT. People kill, diseases kill, animals kill, stupidity kills. I just meet them.

NICHOLAS. Meet them?

ASSISTANT. I'm the first to extend a hand.

NICHOLAS. But you said you could arrange euthanasia?

ASSISTANT. I can arrange it — but I wouldn't be the one to carry it out.

NICHOLAS. You're just like that degenerate President of theirs, who set off a mass slaughter with other people's hands.

ASSISTANT (smiling brightly). Trying to make me angry?

NICHOLAS. Didn't work?

ASSISTANT. I'm not evil — why would I get angry?

NICHOLAS. I get angry. Does that make me evil?

Pause.

ASSISTANT. I don't meet those whose hands are stained with the blood of the innocent.

NICHOLAS. And who meets them?

ASSISTANT. No one.

NICHOLAS. No one at all?

ASSISTANT. Believe me, the worst thing that can happen to a person is for no one to meet them there.

NICHOLAS. Why?

ASSISTANT. Then they remain in complete solitude, with what they've done. And believe me — there is no punishment more terrible.

NICHOLAS. Do I have the blood of innocents on my hands?

ASSISTANT. What do you think?

NICHOLAS. I don't have hands.

ASSISTANT (smirks). Then there's no case to answer.

NICHOLAS. Will someone meet me?

ASSISTANT. You — yes.

Pause.

ASSISTANT. My offer still stands.

NICHOLAS. Can I think about it?

ASSISTANT. As long as you like.

NICHOLAS. Thank you.

ASSISTANT (smirks). Don't mention it.

NICHOLAS. Thank you for the fact that I'm here, and not lying in a field, or in a morgue.

ASSISTANT. That thanks isn't for me.

NICHOLAS. Then for who?

ASSISTANT. For those who'll meet you after I extend my hand.

NICHOLAS. And who will meet me?

ASSISTANT. You'll find out soon, Nicholas.

The Assistant leaves.

SCENE 16

Nicholas–Before appears. He slowly approaches Nicholas, pacing the stage.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. The first day was pure chaos: columns trying to break through to the capital, tanks and APCs blowing up, their turrets shooting into the sky, people burning. In one APC, the hatches jammed and they howled in there, roasting alive… Serves them right for creeping where they had no business being. Thousands lining up at draft offices, rifles handed out straight off the trucks.

NICHOLAS. I spent the whole night in that line. It was February — I was freezing my ass off.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. You even begged for two extra mags.

NICHOLAS. Yeah, that major was stunned by my nerve — but for some reason, he gave them to me.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. He couldn't say no. You should've seen your eyes.

NICHOLAS. Yeah… my eyes.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. I'm sorry.

NICHOLAS. Me too. But those mags came in handy.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. The slaughter went on for about ten days — everyone shooting at anyone who even vaguely looked like the enemy, just in case. Nobody took prisoners, nobody showed mercy. Civilians tried to get out, but the roads were hell: their APCs mowing down cars with families, with kids, and we torched their APCs. Their tanks fired at apartment blocks, and the buildings exploded inside-out, furniture blown into the street — and we torched their tanks. Everywhere, the smashed teeth of high-rises stuck out, courtyards filled with fresh corpses no one was there to bury. We fucked them up good back then. Serves them right for creeping where they had no business being.

NICHOLAS. Damn right — serves them right.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. When that guy — I never even learned his name — took a bullet to the head half a meter from me, I realized I could really die. Honestly, that's when it hit me for the first time that this was no fucking game.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. No shit — not Counter-Strike. I damn near shit myself. And that evening there was that tank — blew the whole place to hell and kept tailing us.

NICHOLAS. Yeah. Pikachu and Gramps were dry, and I had half a mag left. Lucky for us that auto shop had a service pit — we crammed ourselves in there and stayed quiet as mice until the tank moved on.

NICHOLAS. You saved all of us that day, remembering that shop.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Yeah. Shame about the mechanic. He was a good guy.

SCENE 17

The Chorus returns to the stage. Sounds of battle and screams begin, swelling into the background of the action.

CHORUS.
The city where you were happy — destroyed.
Your former life — destroyed.
Around you, the innocent were killed —
Those who resisted and those who submitted,
Those who were afraid and those who never had time to be afraid,
Those who hoped and those who gave up.
People around you died no matter what they believed.
Death simply came and took those who weren't expecting it.
Not yesterday, when they went to bed.
Not four days ago, when they spent the weekend with family.
Not when they celebrated Christmas.
Not when they swam in the sea in summer.
Not when they conceived a child whose body now lies beside them.
Everything that happened felt like a dream
You couldn't wake up from:
A friend who, a minute ago, was so alive,
Now lying like a rag doll!
You realized that death can't be rewound — it can only be beaten to the draw.
You learned that killing must be fast.
First: it's easier that way. Second: you don't have time to hesitate.
Your friend was never a rag doll,
And the rag doll that fell beside you — was no longer him.
Those you turn into torn rag dolls stop being human.
There's no connection between you and them.
No guilt, no shame, no fear.
You simply manage to strike first, to survive.
You sacrifice every feeling except hate.

The action on stage resembles both a training drill and live combat. It is mechanical, built from repeating sequences of movements. The lines may also repeat — obsessively, compulsively; this repetition gives them a feverish, psychotic intensity. The repetitiveness of action symbolizes hopelessness and futility.

CHORUS.
No thinking — not allowed.
No reflecting — not allowed.
If you think — you'll get killed!
You don't want to be killed, do you?
You want to win!
You want to be a hero!
You crave glory!
You are special!
You want to be even more special!
You've killed — so you deserve special treatment!
Forward only!
We'll show them!
We'll tear them apart!
We had lives,
we had wives and children,
we had plans for vacations,
we loved our homes!
You came to kill us —
now we'll kill you!
We'll kill as many of you as we can!
Drink their deaths to the fullest!
Take as much as you can carry!
How many lives have you collected?
Attack! One, two, three!
Again! One, two, three!
Faster! One, two, three!
Excellent, soldier!
You're fast and sharp.
You kill with precision.
You manage to slip away, to dodge, to roll.
You feel the crawl of the moment
and know how to use it to kill first.
You know how to bait the enemy into mistakes
and you always kill first.
At first you kept count, then you lost it.
What's the difference — a hundred or two hundred?
What's the difference — two hundred or five hundred?

You are part of something bigger.
Every kill of yours is sacred and forgiven.
The name of your brigade is constantly in the news!
You are like demigods!
You even look like gods —
muscles, beards, weapons!
You hurl lightning!
Your hands move on their own!
You are more than human now!
You are a machine of death!
Who were you six months ago? Nobody!
Who are you now? A hero!
You are Superman, washing in blood!
It is your sacred duty — to kill!
You will kill them all!
You will kill them all!
You will kill them all!

The stage is suddenly plunged into darkness. At the same moment, a powerful explosion erupts.
In the darkness, the sound of earth collapsing from the blast.
Then — silence.

SCENE 18

Slowly, the light returns.
The Chorus is scattered across the stage, like bodies thrown by an explosion.
Footsteps.
Nina enters, walks slowly toward Nicholas, and stops at some distance.

A pause.

Unbearably long, Nicholas and Nina remain silent and still.
Nicholas speaks first.

NICHOLAS. Who?

NINA. All of them.

NICHOLAS. How?

NINA. Direct hit on the pickup.

A long pause in silence.
Suddenly, into this silence, the Nurse enters with a radio broadcasting a football game.

NURSE. Here's your football! When you've had enough, call me.

The Nurse puts the radio on the nightstand by Nicholas, adjusts the volume, and leaves.

Nina and Nicholas remain silent.
One by one, the Chorus rises and, under the sound of the football game, quietly leaves the stage.

Only Nicholas and Nina remain.
The football game continues.
They are motionless.
Suddenly Nina steps forward, goes to the nightstand, and switches off the radio.

NICHOLAS. Why'd you turn it off?

NINA. I just needed to do something—anything—so I wouldn't feel completely helpless.

NICHOLAS. And what can I do for that?

NINA. I don't know… Say something.

NICHOLAS. What?

NINA. That you believe me.

NICHOLAS. Believe you what?

NINA. That I wasn't with anyone… while you were there.

NICHOLAS. What difference does that make now?

NINA. It matters to me.

NICHOLAS. Will that bring them back?

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Back in training, we had an instructor, callsign Punisher—kindest guy you could meet.

NINA. Punisher?

NICHOLAS. Yeah. Sometimes they give callsigns the opposite way. Like a joke. We had this giant, two-meter machine-gunner, Kolya, a real T-rex, but his callsign was Pussycat.

NINA. Was?

NICHOLAS. Was.

NINA. I'm sorry.

NICHOLAS. Doesn't matter… Anyway, Punisher's wife took their kid to Germany. Hooked up with a German. When Punisher found out, he volunteered for the front line.

NINA. And?

NICHOLAS. Still alive, I think. Just… in training he had a thing with the kitchen girl.

NINA. Uh-huh. So, when he was cheating on his wife, all was fine. But when she cheated, he lost his mind?

NICHOLAS. Exactly.

NINA. And why are you telling me this?

NICHOLAS. Just… you know.

NINA. Got it.

Nicholas is silent.

NINA. Fucking hell…

Pause.

NICHOLAS. I keep wondering if all this happened to me because of that.

NINA. If it was for that, your dick would've been blown off—and it's still in place.

NICHOLAS. How do you know?

NINA. Your doctor told me.

NICHOLAS. Figures.

Pause.

NINA. Jesus, Nika, do you really think I give a damn who you screwed out there in the trenches?

NICHOLAS. Don't you?

NINA. The guys are dead, Nika! Do you even get that?

NICHOLAS. So what? It was only a matter of time!

NINA. Time?!

Pause. Nina stares at Nicholas in shock.

NICHOLAS. You really that naïve? You think we expected to survive out there?!

NINA. But you did survive, Nika!

NICHOLAS. You think I'm alive right now?!

NINA. Then who the hell am I talking to?

Pause.

NICHOLAS. I don't know, Nina. I have no fucking clue who you're talking to right now!

Pause.

NINA. This is just fucked up…

NICHOLAS. Get out.

Nina looks at Nicholas as if seeing him for the first time.
Then she spins on her heel and quickly leaves.

SCENE 19

Nicholas–Before enters, clapping demonstratively.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Am I really such an asshole?

NICHOLAS. You're watching the show Know Thyself.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. World champion of bullshit.

NICHOLAS. Well, at least I'm first in something.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Hard to beat that!

NICHOLAS. Hope you're satisfied.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Completely.

NICHOLAS. So I'm free now?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Bound by absolutely nothing.

NICHOLAS. Feel the trend?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Oh yeah! Hero and lover rolled into one!

NICHOLAS. A real achievement.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Peak of darkness! Depth of the pit!

NICHOLAS. Wonderful. "A man is a god in ruins."

Pause.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Looks like your problems aren't just with your body.

NICHOLAS. Wow! Thanks, Captain Obvious!

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (laughs). Oh! Do you remember the first time someone called you that? Fifth grade! How old were we?

NICHOLAS. Twelve.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (laughs). Right! Damn… And the geography teacher—she was a smart one!

NICHOLAS. And gorgeous.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. With a tasty last name…

NICHOLAS. Pryanishnikova—like Gingerbread!

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Chemistry teacher wasn't bad either!

NICHOLAS. But a bitch. Gave me a failing grade for nothing.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. For nothing? We stole red phosphorus from the safe, mixed it with sulfur,
and lit it up. Smoked half the school out, they called the fire brigade. You call that nothing?

NICHOLAS. That's a fail in behavior, not in chemistry! Chemistry we knew damn well!

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Fair enough, but not exactly just.

NICHOLAS. Maybe she was bitter because of that tragic love affair? Whole school knew.

NICHOLAS. With the math teacher? With "Mr. Crammer"?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Yeah, "If you're too dumb, then cram!"

They laugh, reminiscing. Slowly their laughter fades. Smiles disappear, faces turn sad.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. As always, shit hit the fan out of nowhere.

NICHOLAS. Out of nowhere, yeah. Though it was clear twenty years ago a war was coming.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. To who? Us?

NICHOLAS. Yeah… You're right.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Remember what we dreamed of?

NICHOLAS. I remember us lying on the benches of the school stadium, staring at the stars. October. Indian summer. Almost dark, and the sky was packed with stars…

Nicholas–Before picks up the radio left by the Nurse, tries to tune in a melody. Suddenly children's voices break through. Laughter, the squeak of swings, a ball bouncing.
The sounds grow louder, spilling out of the radio into the stage space.
The audience is carried to a playground where boys and girls play.

Among them, Little Nicholas eagerly tells his friends about his dreams.

VOICE OF LITTLE NICHOLAS. When I grow up, I'll be an astronaut! I'll fly to the Moon, then to Mars, and then into deep space.

VOICE OF SECOND BOY. Where?

VOICE OF LITTLE NICHOLAS. Maybe even Aldebaran.

VOICE OF SECOND BOY. Why? What for?

VOICE OF LITTLE NICHOLAS. Maybe I'll find cosmic animals. Catch them and bring them to a zoo.

VOICE OF SECOND BOY. There's nothing there.

VOICE OF LITTLE NICHOLAS. There is!

VOICE OF SECOND BOY. Like you could catch them! And if you did, they'd eat you!

VOICE OF LITTLE NICHOLAS. I'll have a robot-friend. He'll always be with me and help me! So there!

VOICE OF GIRL. Nika, Petya, are you coming to play?

The children burst into laughter and happy shouting.
Their voices fill the space with joy.
Over their laughter, a strange sound grows—the unmistakable whistle of an approaching rocket.
A massive explosion, collapsing walls.
Children's screams of terror and pain.

VOICE OF DIMA. "The building in our street got blown up."

VOICE OF A LITTLE GIRL. "The first time we got bombed, my hands were shaking and I was crying. It took me a long time to cope with that."

VOICE OF LERA. "I saw something flying from up to down. I thought it was some kind of plane that would go up again, but it was a missile. People say I was in a state of shock. It was only when Kseniya said, 'Look at your leg!' that I felt the pain. It was awful."

VOICE OF OLEKSANDRA. "I was playing outside, and then it all happened; I don't even remember."

VOICE OF SERYOZHA. “It was so scary. First, there was a strong blow to the back. I fell and couldn’t move.”

VOICE OF NIKITA. “After the sirens wailed, we rushed to a nearby shelter, I will never forget the sight when looking back, right before entering. Buildings were being blown up metres from us, there was chaos all over, and everyone was screaming.”

VOICE OF ANGELINA. “It was very scary. I just thought, when will it all end? There were rockets and a plane flew over us.”

VOICE OF DAVID. “My classroom was on the second floor. There’s nothing left of it. I really wish they would build us a new school. I will probably never sit at a school desk again and will have to finish my studies online, but I hope my two younger brothers can have a proper education.”

VOICE OF NIKA. “I have noticed that as soon as I hear an air raid alarm, my mood deteriorates, and I become sad and nervous. I have seen and heard what a war is, but it is hard to explain it to anyone who has not experienced it. It seems to me this is so unpleasant that I can’t even find words to describe it.”

VOICE OF ANGELINA. “When they start to bomb, I tell mummy I’m going to the corridor and she sits there next to me.”

VOICE OF NATASHA. “All I have left are memories of my home and school. I can close my eyes and recall the location of my classroom, to the left of the hallway from the main entrance. I loved looking out the window at the schoolyard. There were many trees. And from the second floor we could see the sea.”

The Nurse rushes in, goes to the radio, switches it off.
The stage plunges into deafening silence.

Pause.

NURSE. You should sleep, Nicholas. It's always darkest before the dawn.

NICHOLAS. I can’t fall asleep.

NURSE. Then think of something nice…

NICHOLAS. I can’t, Zinaida Yegorovna. There’s nothing nice left in me.

NURSE. Then think of something that doesn’t exist.

NICHOLAS. How can I think of what doesn't exist?

NURSE. The same way everyone before you did.

NICHOLAS. How?

NURSE. It's obvious! Nothing was there, and they thought, and thought—and made it real. So you make it up too.

NICHOLAS. And what can I make up?

NURSE. Anything! Listen, I've been around. (smirks) First the flying carpet, then the airplane—and so on, per aspera ad astra!

NICHOLAS. What's the use?

The Nurse sighs, as if Nicholas has missed something obvious.

NURSE. You've seen Death, Nicholas?

NICHOLAS. So what?

NURSE. Have you seen Life?

NICHOLAS. Life? I guess… maybe.

NURSE. And if you've seen it, smart guy—what's it made of?

NICHOLAS. Well… of everything…

NURSE (smirks). And where did it all come from?

NICHOLAS. I don't know. God created it?

NURSE. Sure, God. But after that?

NICHOLAS. After that?

NURSE (sighs). Life's made of people, Nicholas. People invent it. And whatever they invent, that's how they live. Some invent for themselves, some for others, some for everyone.

NICHOLAS. And what am I supposed to do?

NURSE. Decide—for whom you'll invent.

Pause. Nicholas smirks, as if he's just grasped something important.

NICHOLAS (smiling). Thank you, Zinaida Yegorovna.

NURSE. Don't thank me. Thank your mama. Ah! Teach and teach…

The Nurse leaves.

SCENE 20

Nina enters slowly. Stops, looking at Nicholas.

NICHOLAS. Turns out we're freaks of nature.

NINA. Who?

NICHOLAS. People.

NINA. All of them?

NICHOLAS. Most.

NINA. Alright…

NICHOLAS. Why did you come back?

NINA. I never left.

NICHOLAS. Why not?

NINA. Because I can't understand you, and I can't forgive you. But I can choose to stay with you.

Nicholas is silent.

NINA. Say something to me.

NICHOLAS. What?

NINA. I don’t know. I feel like my whole self depends on whatever you say.

NICHOLAS. I don’t know what to tell you.

NINA. I won’t leave until you at least say something.

NICHOLAS. How do you know I will say something good?

NINA. I don’t know. But what matters is that you speak.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. I love you.

Pause.

NINA. That’s it?

Nicholas gathers his strength.

NICHOLAS. I love you, but I don’t know—really don’t know—what to do. I’ve got no arms, no legs, no eyes. I’m like a helpless child you have to put in a crib and wipe his ass. I don’t know how to live, or why.

NINA. Just live. The “why” will come later.

NICHOLAS. I wanted to die.

NINA. Don’t you want that anymore?

NICHOLAS. That would be stupid.

NINA. Thank you. I need you so much.

NICHOLAS. Why?

NINA. Because I feel good with you.

NICHOLAS. Now? With me like this?

NINA. You know, I try to remember you with arms and legs, and it’s hard. Feels like that wasn’t even you. I could never get close to you the way I wanted.

NICHOLAS. Why?

NINA. You were always… armored, locked inside. But now—you are you. I feel you. I feel myself next to you. I feel that you need me.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. I don't get it—why them and not me? It makes no sense.

NINA. I don't know, my love. I'm just glad you're alive and we can talk.

NICHOLAS. You know, when my mother died, for almost a year I talked to her. I felt her presence, heard her answers to my questions, her voice in my head. Later, she came less often.

NINA. You never told me this.

NICHOLAS. I've known since childhood—we never really die.

NINA. How do you know?

NICHOLAS. When I was a kid, I saw people who had just died. It stopped when I turned fifteen.

NINA. You imagined it.

NICHOLAS. No. First I saw them, and then, that same day or the next, the doorbell would ring or the phone, and my mom would be told that person had died: a coworker, a neighbor downstairs, a distant relative.

Pause.

NINA. You wait for them?

NICHOLAS. Yes. I wait.

NINA. To do what?

NICHOLAS. To tell them what I never managed to, or was too shy to say. And to ask what I could invent that hasn't yet been invented.

NINA. Invent? Why?

NICHOLAS. So everything would be different.

NINA. Everything?

NICHOLAS. Absolutely everything.

NINA. What do you mean?

NICHOLAS (smirks). I just had a little chat with Zinaida Yegorovna.

NINA. She's strange. The first time I came to see you, I walked into the wrong ward. She called me by name. How did she know?

NICHOLAS (joking it off). Around here, everybody knows everything.

NINA. Oh, come on. I'm serious!

NICHOLAS. Well, I know, for instance, that you and I will have two kids. Boys.

NINA. Kids? You always said "the world's shit," and bringing children into it means "condemning them to eternal suffering."

NICHOLAS. I told you a lot of crap.

NINA. You've really changed.

Nicholas lets out a genuine chuckle.

NICHOLAS (ironically). Yeah, I'm sure it's obvious at first sight.

NINA. That's not what I mean.

NICHOLAS. I hope this version of me is better than the last.

NINA (smiling). I hope so too. Time will tell.

NICHOLAS (grinning). Don't dump responsibility on time—it's mine.

NINA. I won't.

Nina kisses Nicholas gently on the lips. She leaves.

SCENE 21

NICHOLAS–BEFORE enters. He walks slowly past Nina, who also passes by, not noticing him.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Seems like she likes you better than me.

NICHOLAS. Does that upset you?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. More like… disarms me.

Pause.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. But I'm glad for you. Truly.

NICHOLAS. You don't want to take revenge on me anymore? Torment me with memories?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Tormenting you is as pointless as tormenting myself. But I can sometimes cheer you up. With memories too.

NICHOLAS. Deal!

They laugh together.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. So, what will you do?

NICHOLAS. Invent what hasn't been invented.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. A dream worthy of me?

NICHOLAS. Worthy of all of us.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. All of us.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Why don't they come?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Maybe they're visiting their loved ones. Gramps has a wife and three kids. Pikachu has a mother. Demon's got two little sisters and a daughter from his first marriage. Red has the aunt who raised her and a cousin. Kid had no kids, Bolt neither, but they had parents, brothers, sisters. You're not the first name on their visiting list.

NICHOLAS. I miss them.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE. Me too.

He rises.

NICHOLAS. Will you come visit me?

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (smiles). Always. If you ever need someone to tell you you've become greater than I was—call me.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE leaves.

SCENE 22

Nicholas remains on stage in silence.
Gradually the silence fills with sounds. At first—battle: explosions, gunfire.
Then, through the cannonade, voices break in—laughter, conversations, fragments of TV speeches, politicians' statements, children's fairy tales, verses from the Bible, lines from philosophical treatises. All of it collides in a cacophony of sound, with Nicholas at the center.

Abruptly, the cacophony cuts off.
Silence.
Footsteps.
The Doctor enters.

DOCTOR. Man is trapped in his imagination, Nicholas. First he fantasizes his future—then he creates it.

NICHOLAS. Looks like me and my childhood fantasies turned out to be the exception.

DOCTOR. Looks like now—you are free.

NICHOLAS. I never thought it would all turn out like this.

DOCTOR. And if you had known it would—would you have taken the exemption?

A short pause.

NICHOLAS. No.

DOCTOR. Why not?

NICHOLAS. Hard to say. Probably… it wouldn't have been right.

DOCTOR. A man cannot act "right" or "wrong."

NICHOLAS. What do you mean?

DOCTOR. Do ants act "right" or "wrong" when they eat a caterpillar?

NICHOLAS (smirks). That's a stupid question. They're ants. That's their nature.

DOCTOR. The gulf between God and man is far greater than between man and ant. The ant may imagine what man desires but cannot comprehend man—because their natures are different. It is the same with God.

NICHOLAS. Then what does God want? To test me? To kill me? To force me to believe?

DOCTOR. You speak as a man.

NICHOLAS. I am a man.

DOCTOR. God wants nothing from you. You are simply reaping the fruits of circumstance.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Why did you abandon me?

DOCTOR. I was always with you.

NICHOLAS. Why didn't I see you?

DOCTOR. You saw me many times—but never noticed.

NICHOLAS. Why did you invent war?

DOCTOR. I invented love, and eternal peace. War—you invented. You think when you hate and kill you are becoming like me. But you are not.

NICHOLAS. Death does not exist.

DOCTOR. The end of existence does not exist. But separation does. Grief and pain do. I feel what each of you feels when you are wounded, when you die, when you lose your loved ones. A year ago I tried to save not only you—but myself.

NICHOLAS. Then why don't you destroy us?

DOCTOR. Who am I to destroy?

NICHOLAS. God.

DOCTOR. You have too human a picture of God, my boy.

Pause.

DOCTOR. I created the world. I created abundance, love, prosperity.
I did not create nations, borders, religions, private property, greed, envy, fear, hatred, wars.
You filled my world with hatred and the stench of corpses.
You hide behind my name, but act in your own.
Now this is your world—may you enjoy it.

NICHOLAS. I'm a child of this world! That's what I grew up with! They taught me that land must be defended, enemies must be killed! How was I to know I was doing evil, when I was sure I was doing good?

DOCTOR. As I said—you have human notions of good and evil.

NICHOLAS. Because I am human!

DOCTOR. Not entirely anymore.

NICHOLAS. Give me back my sight! My hands, my legs!

DOCTOR. And what can you give?

NICHOLAS. I have nothing to give. Nothing left.

DOCTOR. You only refuse to accept what you already have.

The Doctor exits.
Nicholas remains alone.

SCENE 23

NICHOLAS–BEFORE and the Chorus appear, playing Nicholas's brothers-in-arms.
The war is still raging for them; they're in another fight.
Chorus lines are split among performers at the director's discretion.

CHORUS.
Move in, move in!
Go, go, go!
Cover!

Explosion.

CHORUS.
Who the fuck tossed that grenade?!
Not us!
Not us?!

Gunfire, bullets ripping through branches, a vest taking a hit.

CHORUS.
Fuck!
Where's the enemy?
Twelve o'clock! Dead twelve! Fifty meters!

Explosion. Return fire.

CHORUS.
Motherfucker!
Get down, you bitch!
Grenade! Anything, I don't care!

They throw a grenade. Explosion.

CHORUS.
Got 'em, fuck yeah!

Return fire, another blast.

CHORUS.
Ah! Shit!
You hit? You hit?
My leg! I'm hit!
Medic!
Who is hit?
Leg wound! Shit it hurts!
Stay low, damn it!
Are you hit?

There's someone out there. I'm fucking fed up with this! I'll go tear that shit to pieces myself!
Get to the group, I'll cover this sector!
Eyes up! Drone overhead!

Drone buzzing. Return fire.

CHORUS.
Got that fucker! Drone down!
Where? Where the fuck is it?! Where, bitch?!

A heavy blast. Silence.

CHORUS.
Everyone alive?
Fuck, something hit!
You're hit!
I can feel the blood pouring down my back!
Medevac!
Ditch the comms! They're locking in on us!
I'm fucked…
Who's shooting?!
Our gunner?
No.
Contact left! Enemy MG!
Everyone alive?
On me, on me, on me!
Gramps, grenade!

Explosion. Gunfire. They hit the dirt.

CHORUS.
Shit! The Bastard's there! He lobbed a grenade!
Enough already! Shut his fucking mouth!
Gun's jammed! Great, just great! Immediate action drill… Clear! Cover me! Cover me while I deal with this shit.

Desperate gunfire.

CHORUS.
Got 'em?
Looks like.
Ah! You dumb fuck! (finishes him) The bastard was still breathing!
Kid, I'm Gramps—smoke 'em out, smoke 'em out!

Now—RPG that spot!
This way! Move, move!

Explosion.

CHORUS.
What the fuck was that?!
Surrender, assholes! You're fucked anyway! You're fucking dead!
Cover each other, don't let 'em flank!

Still fighting, the unit exits the stage. NICHOLAS–BEFORE is the last in line. He halts for a moment, looks at Nicholas, then turns to the audience.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (to the audience). We keep fighting.

CHORUS.
What's up?
They're holding out pretty good…
Surrender, you fucks! We'll trade you! Either give up, or you're fucked! You made your choice, dumbasses!

NICHOLAS–BEFORE (to the audience). We keep fighting. Two houses left. Goodbye, everyone. Kisses, love you.

NICHOLAS–BEFORE catches up with the squad. Together they leave the stage, still in battle. The sounds of combat fade.

SCENE 24

The Nurse enters, goes to Nicholas's bed, and changes his diaper. While she works, footsteps approach. The Doctor and his Assistant enter. The Nurse finishes, leaves.

ASSISTANT. Mercy is your sin.

DOCTOR. You are, as always, precise and flawless.

ASSISTANT. I harvest what you've sown.

DOCTOR. I envy your patience.

ASSISTANT. I have nowhere to rush. I'll get what's mine in the end.

DOCTOR (to Nicholas). Did you manage to say goodbye?

NICHOLAS. Seems they've got no time for me right now.

DOCTOR. So it seems. I'm sorry.

NICHOLAS. Why is everything this way?

DOCTOR. You chose it.

NICHOLAS. Did I even have a choice?

ASSISTANT. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

NICHOLAS. "And the soldiers cast lots, dividing His garments among them."

Pause.

DOCTOR. I forgive you.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. What now?

DOCTOR. Life.

NICHOLAS. What am I supposed to do?

DOCTOR. What would you like to do?

NICHOLAS. I want you to give me back my eyes, my hands, my legs.

DOCTOR. Alas, that is beyond me.

NICHOLAS. Then you're not God.

DOCTOR (smirks). You've too human an idea of God, my boy. Still—I can bargain you enough time, and a little meaning.

NICHOLAS. A little?

DOCTOR. A little. The rest you'll have to find yourself.

NICHOLAS. How?

DOCTOR. With your heart. The world is full of people with sight—but blind hearts. Maybe that's the problem?

NICHOLAS. That's not the problem. Or not the only one.

DOCTOR. Then what is?

NICHOLAS. That you designed the world badly.

DOCTOR (taken aback). Well, shit!

NICHOLAS. You made a world where things happen as they do, and everyone's so used to it they don't even ask questions.

DOCTOR. I didn't design the world. I designed a symbol.

NICHOLAS. What's the difference?

DOCTOR. I created a symbol. The symbol became a word. Man was given power over words—but sadly, words rule man. Now you speak words that rule you, and write your history. The world is a tale, told by billions of voices, telling itself to itself. You want to change the world?

NICHOLAS. I do. How?

DOCTOR. You already know how.

NICHOLAS. I don't understand.

DOCTOR. You don't believe that you understand.

NICHOLAS. How can I believe?

DOCTOR. Man believes when he has no other choice.

NICHOLAS. What if I don't?

DOCTOR. Then you'll spend the rest of your life shitting yourself in vain.

NICHOLAS. No!

DOCTOR. That's the price.

NICHOLAS. I don't want that!

DOCTOR. Then it seems you've no choice.

Pause.

DOCTOR. Imagine them a world, Nicholas. Invent them a new world—and tell them about it.

NICHOLAS. How do I begin?

DOCTOR. Once, I said: "Let there be light."

ASSISTANT. "And God said, let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night."

NICHOLAS. Not that!

Pause.

DOCTOR. Say it.

ASSISTANT. Say it.

Pause.

NICHOLAS. Let there be love.

A sound. Sudden blackout. Silence.

END OF PLAY.

Chapter 5. Analysis of the Play

5.1 From Planned Plot to Post-Traumatic Reality

5.1.1 From Linear Exposition to Traumatic Present

The play's original plot, presented in Appendix 1, followed a classical principle, allowing for a path of the protagonist's transformation to be seen, beginning with the exposition. In the final version of the play, the pre-war world—the exposition as a state of equilibrium—no longer exists for the reader, just as it no longer exists for the protagonist. Because post-traumatic memories are fragmented, the exposition does not exist as a full-fledged linear prologue. Memories of pre-war life appear in the form of recollections, allusions, dreams, and hallucinations, as they would in real life after a similar trauma, when the secure sense of self and connection with caring people has been shattered (Herman 76).

Thus, the classical dramatic equilibrium is refracted through the symptom of trauma. The audience never sees Nicolas's pre-war "normality" directly—they encounter it only through the distorted lens of the protagonist's memory, already shattered by the traumatic event. This abruptly immerses the audience in the post-disaster world and better conveys the protagonist's experience of breaking with a normal, stable, pre-traumatic reality.

5.1.2 Traumatic Fragmentation as a Principle of Dramaturgical Form

To convey more accurately the fragmentation of consciousness after trauma, the plot ultimately developed not along a straightforward "event–consequence" line. In the end, external

causality — the familiar "event–consequence" chain — gives way to an inner, traumatic logic in which the plot unfolds through returns, repetitions, and flashbacks. Instead, the structure of the play rests on rhythmic returns: flashbacks of battle, the voices of brothers in arms, documentary fragments, hallucinatory choral monologues of amputated limbs and eyes, and snatches of news and philosophical speeches.

These returns are not a decorative background. They function much like intrusive memories in clinical descriptions of PTSD: they break into the present, disrupt temporal continuity, and force both the protagonist and the audience to relive the same experience again and again, each time from a slightly different angle. Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth both emphasize that traumatic memory is marked by fragmentation, belatedness, and repetition: the event is not integrated into a linear narrative, but returns belatedly in the form of sensory fragments, dreams, and reenactments (Herman 56-57; Caruth 7-8). In the play, this becomes the primary mode of plot development. The scenes do not so much "advance" the story as gradually assemble the disparate elements of the traumatic image into a unified field.

Importantly, this principle did not arise as a pre-planned formal strategy but emerged from the writing process itself. As I noted in Section 3.5, it became clear at a certain point that trying to maintain, simultaneously and on the same level, the structures of tragedy, the monomyth, and the PTSD model was doomed to fail. The text could not honestly follow all three at once. The only sustainable solution was to subordinate the play, first of all, to the logic of trauma — to allow its non-linear, repetitive, and fragmentary temporality to dictate the form. As a result, the other two models receded into the background, and fragmentation, cyclicality,

hallucinations, and the traumatic impulse toward incompletion began to define the dramaturgical shape of the play.

5.1.3 Passive Hero and Frozen Stage Time

Nicholas's maimed, immobilized body and loss of sight initially create a radical form of passivity. He cannot act in the traditional sense of drama: move around the stage, perform physical deeds, or change his circumstances. His only remaining tools are his voice, his hearing, and his inner choice.

At the psychic level, this passivity unfolds into the experience of being stuck in time. Nicholas finds himself suspended between life and death, between past and future, between reality and hallucination. External events in the play are few; time, space, and conflict are therefore concentrated within his consciousness. External plot is minimized, while internal dramaturgy, conversely, is maximized. The primary conflict occurs between Nicholas and Nicholas–Before — a personified memory of his pre-injury self, with his former thoughts, desires, actions, and the choices that led to his disability. This conflict traps Nicholas between the desire to die and the inability to stop living, between guilt toward those who died and the need to give meaning to his own survival. Until this conflict is at least partially resolved, recovery cannot truly begin.

In clinical accounts of PTSD, this state corresponds to an extended phase of "remembrance and mourning": the traumatic history is no longer denied, but not yet integrated; the survivor is repeatedly drawn back into it, unable either to leave it behind or to translate it into

a coherent, forward-moving narrative, stopped by fear that the task is insurmountable (Herman 273). The play's stage time mirrors this suspension: the reader or spectator likewise finds themselves caught in recurring motifs of pain, accusation, guilt, and helplessness, as the scenes return to the same wound rather than progressing toward conventional resolution.

It is important to note that, in clinical reality, trauma does not always result in outward passivity; many traumatized people, on the contrary, relieve the moments of trauma not only in their thoughts and dreams but also in their actions (Herman 57). The play deliberately chooses the opposite pole: radical outward immobility combined with maximal inner tension, so that the primary through-line is the protagonist's internal work of surviving, remembering, and beginning to recover.

5.1.4 From the Kobzar to the Creator of a New Universe of Love

During the play's development, it became clear that several planned episodes were no longer dramaturgically justified. This primarily concerns the "Ancestors' Call" scene. In the original draft, a kobzar (a traditional Ukrainian itinerant bard, usually blind, who performs epic songs and historical ballads while accompanying himself on the kobza or bandura) was supposed to appear in Nicholas's dream as the embodiment of ancestral voices, linking his traumatic experience to national tradition and casting him as a keeper of memory — a singer and storyteller of the people's history.

As the play progressed, however, and with the introduction of the figures of God and Death, the action shifted to a more explicitly existential and theological level. Dialogues with the

Doctor and the Assistant, who personify God and Death, elevated Nicholas's trauma into a theological dimension, in which the kobzar began to feel dramaturgically redundant. The planned "Ancestors' Call" scene redirected the story too directly and too unambiguously established the hero's new identity. Instead of emerging from Nicholas's inner work, the survivor's mission appeared as if bestowed from the outside by a culturally recognizable figure.

One could say that, at a certain point, the plot began to edit itself. Attempts to "complete" the pre-conceived scenes encountered resistance from the existing text. Within the already established dramatic space, where trauma and its symptoms defined the form, a linear, "successful" return to a stable identity seemed implausible and artistically unconvincing. As a result, some of the events from the original outline remained only in the appendix — as part of the documented history of the play's development and of the analytical plotting process — but were not included in the final text.

In the new ending, Nicholas does not assume the role of a kobzar, a bearer of an existing canon, but rather a different identity: a person who, having survived catastrophe, becomes a co-creator of a new universe in which love is declared the primary law. The functions initially invested in the kobzar — to connect personal trauma with collective memory and to give it a voice — are redistributed among the Chorus, the dead comrades, the voices of children, and the allegorical figures of God and Death. Nicholas's "survivor mission" shifts from the relatively narrow role of custodian of national memory to a more radical task: to create a world in which love is not a consoling metaphor but a principle of coexistence, and in which his only remaining instruments — words and choices — become tools of creation.

5.2 Plot Blocks, Stages of Recovery, and Tragic Form

If we unfold the play's final, fragmented plot into a conventional linear diagram, its structure can be seen as organized around several major blocks. Each of these blocks can be read as corresponding, at once, to a particular stage of trauma and recovery in Herman's model, to key stations of the monomyth, and to the tragic logic described by Aristotle: the movement from scenes of suffering (pathos) toward recognition (anagnorisis) and a specific form of catharsis. These correspondences are not meant as a rigid one-to-one mapping. In some blocks one framework comes to the foreground while the others remain more implicit, but together they shape the overall tragic and therapeutic logic of the play.

However, the plot does not literally follow the classic "introduction–peripeteia–denouement" pattern. Instead of a linear "adventure," we see a repeated re-experiencing of trauma, in which the external plot is minimal, and the internal mythos — the plot as a single action — unfolds primarily within the hero's consciousness, gradually transforming his identity.

The following overview outlines the play's structure through several major blocks, using the key scenes in which each block is most clearly articulated. Not every scene is discussed separately: shorter or transitional episodes function as connective tissue within these blocks and participate in the same non-linear, post-traumatic dramaturgy.

Block 1. Destroyed Equilibrium and Liminal Space (Scenes 1–3)

The play begins after the catastrophe. In Scene 1, the hospital ward with six beds and the dialogue between the Doctor and the Assistant define a liminal space between life and death, in which the medical staff simultaneously function as allegorical figures of God and Death. In Scene 2, the audience first hears of Nina, and in Scene 3 it encounters her directly through her attempt to reach Nicholas, who has already lost his body and sight. There is no classic exposition of pre-war everyday life: equilibrium exists only in traces — in remarks about Nina, in references to the medical examination, and in allusions to a future that has now been lost.

In Herman's model of recovery, these opening scenes correspond to the initial attempt to establish basic safety after trauma: a safe physical space, the presence of a doctor, and the presence of a partner (Herman 223-224). On the level of the monomyth, however, the crossing of the threshold has already taken place at the moment of Nicholas's injury and amputation. The opening hospital scenes place both protagonist and audience directly inside the world of trauma, in a liminal space closer to Campbell's "belly of the whale" than to the ordinary world (Campbell 74). Following Aristotle's account of peripeteia and his discussion of Oedipus Tyrannus in Poetics (Aristotle 2324, 2325), Nicholas's decisive reversal of fortune has already taken place offstage: the catastrophic injury belongs to the past of the plot, and the dramatic action concerns the working-through of its consequences. In my play, the exposition of the pre-war "ordinary world" does not appear as a separate prologue; instead, it is displaced into Nicholas's fragmented memories and hallucinations. Yet the plot still satisfies Aristotle's requirement of unity of action: everything that happens on stage is a consequence of a single catastrophic event and forms one complete action in his sense of the term (Aristotle 2320–2323).

Block 2. Body Fragmentation and Memory Intrusion (Scenes 4, 6, 8, 10, 12)

The plot then revolves around what has been shattered: the body, memory, and the hero's self-image. In Scene 4, Nicholas–Before's monologue, addressed to the audience, describes how people usually go to war with certain fantasies, and how these fantasies are shattered by a harsher reality. In Scene 6, Nina is drawn into Nicholas's flashback in a way that would be impossible in ordinary life. For the first time, the question arises: is Nina actually present, or is her arrival only another hallucination? This device blurs the line between Nicholas's memories and the ward's physical reality. In Scene 8, Nicholas has his first full confrontation with his prior identity, Nicholas–Before, who announces that he lives "inside Nicholas's head", confirming the splitting of the self. In Scene 10, a chorus of arms, legs, and eyes speaks from the perspective of the lost body, and in Scene 12, Nina's reappearance and the "memory dance" around her turn recollection into a hallucinatory experience: the boundary between present and past is erased, until the arrival of the President (Scene 13) breaks the dream and returns Nicholas to a reality full of grotesque evil.

All these scenes are united by obsessive re-experiencing of trauma: instead of forward movement, we see rhythmic repetitions, fragments of battle, images of the destroyed body, and the oscillation between real and illusory contact between Nicholas and Nina. This corresponds to Herman's phase of "remembrance and mourning", when the trauma cannot yet be integrated and is only compulsively replayed (Herman 256-259, 266), and recalls Campbell's "road of trials", with the difference that here the trials take place primarily within the hero's psyche rather than in the external world (Campbell 81).

From an Aristotelian perspective, the notion of mythos as a unified, coherent action is radically reconfigured. Aristotle criticizes “episodic” plots, in which scenes are loosely connected and could be rearranged without affecting the whole (Aristotle 2323-2324). In my play, the fragmentation of the protagonist's self, his memories, and consciousness disrupts linear time, formally resembling such episodicity, but each “insertion” of memory remains strictly functional: it intensifies the scene of suffering (pathos) and repeatedly returns the spectator to the same core event. In this sense, mythos is constructed not as a sequence of different external actions, but as the successive layering of the same post-traumatic suffering (pathos). Despite its external fragmentation, Aristotle’s requirement of unity of action is thus preserved at the level of internal action, whose post-traumatic form dictates its fractured appearance (Aristotle 2320–2323).

Block 3. Intolerance of Experience and a Death Wish (Scenes 7, 9, 11)

In Scene 7, Nicholas and Nina’s conversation about the “KIA/WIA” formula and the way military language downplays horror (“slightly wounded”, “the situation is serious but under control”) highlights the gap between the experience of those who fight and those who read reports from the front. Nicholas lists physical injuries that will never appear in official summaries and admits that he is “saturated with hatred” and wants to kill everyone. Nina, unable to bear this, asks him to stop: for her, it is impossible to comprehend and accept what Nicholas has lived through. The scene exposes the gulf between those who have undergone trauma and those who have not.

Scene 9 deepens this gap between the hero's perception, coloured by traumatic experience, and the reality offered to him by others, through a dialogue with the Doctor about pain, prosthetics, the possibility of a future, and a sarcastic, desperate juxtaposition of "fantasy" and "euthanasia". In Scene 11, Nicholas, rejecting his new reality altogether, directly asks the nurse for "an injection so I don't wake up", to which she responds with humorous but harsh logic: such an injection is paid for not with money, but with life; and despite his feeling of emptiness, he still has plenty of that life. In these scenes, Nicholas comes as close as possible to renouncing life. Within Campbell's monomyth, this corresponds to the "belly of the whale" — a state in which the hero seems already cut off from the world of the living.

For Aristotle, such episodes fall under what he calls suffering (pathos), "an action of a destructive or painful nature, such as murders on the stage, tortures, woundings, and the like" (Aristotle 2324). In classical tragedy, this suffering is usually structured to prepare the ground for subsequent recognition and catharsis. In the play, this block deliberately holds the hero within pathos in order to intensify his experience. As a result of this prolonged stay in suffering, the wish for death and hatred toward the world do not immediately transform into purification, but remain a dominant state for a long time. The energy of suffering is thereby concentrated and becomes sufficient to propel the hero toward a theological debate with God about meaning and responsibility.

From Herman's perspective, this block marks a dangerous suspension between the first and second stages of recovery. The basic conditions of safety have not yet been secured, and Nicholas's wish for death shows how, in the absence of a reliable bodily and relational

environment, the process cannot move into remembrance and mourning but stalls in chronic terror and despair (Herman 223, 254).

Block 4. Theological Argument with God and Flirting with Death (Scenes 14–15)

Scenes 14 and 15 elevate Nicholas's internal crisis to a theological level. In Scene 14, Nicholas turns to God, accusing Him of cowardice and injustice, recites the Lord's Prayer as a final attempt to "test" the existence of a higher power, and immediately enters into an argument with the Doctor, who asks whether he forgives his debtors. The dialogue with the Doctor here simultaneously recalls Campbell's "atonement with the Father", in which the hero confronts a supreme authority (Campbell 105), and Herman's second stage of recovery, where traumatic experience is reassembled through the search for explanation and an addressee of guilt (Herman 258).

In Scene 15, the Assistant comes to the forefront as the personification of Death. She offers Nicholas "options" for leaving, emphasizing that she herself does not kill anyone, but only "meets" those who have already been killed by illness, people, or circumstances. Nicholas tries to accuse her of mass murder and compares her to the aggressor who initiated the war, but the Assistant turns the conversation to the responsibility of the living and to the fact that she does not encounter those whose hands are stained with the blood of the innocent. These scenes shift Nicholas from a pure death wish to the question of responsibility — including his own. For the first time, an ethical problem is formulated that exceeds the scale of Nicholas's individual pain and despair.

In Aristotelian terms, this sequence can be read as a progression from sheer suffering toward the possibility of anagnorisis: a "change from ignorance to knowledge" that marks the decisive turn of the plot (Aristotle 2324). Through these agon-like verbal duels, Nicholas approaches a recognition of how responsibility is distributed between God and humans, between "fate" and personal choice. At the same time, the traditional tragic pattern in which such recognition, coupled with reversal, "will arouse either pity or fear … and … bring about the happy or unhappy ending," typically involving further ruin or punishment as in Oedipus (Aristotle 2324, 2326), is disrupted here: Nicholas has already been physically "punished" by the catastrophe before the play begins, and recognition does not lead to additional destruction or to death. Instead, it prepares the ground for a different outcome: a change in his attitude toward life and the formulation of a new position from which he can choose to live.

Block 5. Witnessing War and Survivor's Guilt (Scenes 16–18, 23)

This block focuses on Nicholas's combat experience and shows how war shaped his psyche and the patterns of responsibility and guilt that later determine his choices.

In Scene 16, Nicholas–Before recounts the first days of the full-scale invasion: queues at the recruiting office, scrambling for additional magazines, the chaos and carnage of the initial battles. Here, the theme of a voluntary decision to go to the front and a gradual habituation to killing as a "profession" emerges. Scene 17, spoken by the Chorus, depicts the devastated city, the death of innocents, the transformation of people into "rag dolls", and the way survival demands sacrificing almost everything except hatred.

In Scene 18, Nina reports the death of Nicholas's entire unit: "a direct hit on the pickup truck". Their prolonged silence, the nurse's intrusion with a football broadcast, and then the story of their comrades (Instructor Punisher, "T-Rex", and others) set personal loss against the absurd ordinariness of mass death. Finally, in Scene 23, the Chorus and Nicholas–Before enact the final — and, in a sense, eternal — battle of his fallen comrades, which Nicholas no longer shares with them: we hear shouts, commands, curses, panic, and see Nicholas–Before, as he leaves the stage, tell the audience that they are "still fighting" and bid them farewell.

These scenes stage the paradox of survivor's guilt: Nicholas remains in the hospital, deprived of his body and sight, while those who stood beside him have died and others continue to be killed. His survival appears less as a "fortunate escape" than as a burden that must somehow be justified. In Herman's terms, this still belongs to the space of "remembrance and mourning", but it already borders on "reconstructing the story" of testimony: the hero does not simply remember; he gives an account of war that refuses embellishment and resists the euphemistic language of official reports (Herman 256-260).

In terms of the monomyth, these recollections replay what would conventionally appear as the hero's "road of trials" and central ordeal (Campbell 81). Yet the linear adventure has here been displaced into memory. Instead of watching Nicholas move through successive battles, the audience encounters the trials as testimony, delivered from the hospital ward, exposing the price of survival. The heroic journey is thus relocated from an outward quest to an inward one.

From an Aristotelian perspective, pathos is here highly condensed: these scenes concentrate the incidents of suffering that arouse pity and fear in the spectator (Aristotle 2324).

In many classical tragedies, such suffering prepares the way for catharsis, and the hero's death can be read as a restoration of order or justice. In this play, however, the deaths of Nicholas's brothers-in-arms leave the world broken and unjust. The function of these scenes is not to close the story but to push the hero's experience to an almost impossible limit. Faced with the fact that others continue to die while he remains alive, Nicholas is forced toward the next step — the attempt to integrate this unbearable knowledge into a new way of living.

Block 6. Climax: Integration of the Past and the New Self (Scenes 19–21)

At this point, the movement toward integration begins and reaches its emotional climax. In Scene 19, Nicholas–Before and Nicholas, for the first time, begin to bond rather than attack each other, reminiscing about school stories. Then, through the sound of the radio, they find themselves on a playground, where the voices of little Nicholas and his friends can be heard dreaming of space and a "robot friend". These voices are interrupted by the explosion of a rocket and documentary testimonies from Ukrainian children about bombings and losses. Here, the climax of the play is reached: childhood fantasies of a happy future are shattered by the reality of today's war.

In Scene 20, the integration of Nicholas's past and new self begins to take shape. His conversation with Nina shifts from mutual recriminations to confession: Nicholas admits that he wanted to die, but that death now seems "stupid" to him; Nina confesses that she feels truly close to him for the first time now, when the "armour" of the former hero has been broken. Scene 21 essentially marks a reconciliation with his "before" self: Nicholas–Before expresses his sincere happiness for Nicholas, refuses to take revenge on him with his memories, and, when asked

“What will you do?”, the hero replies, “Invent something that hasn’t been invented yet” — a dream “worthy of us all.”

These scenes mark the transition to Herman’s third stage, reconnection: the hero begins to rebuild relationships with the living (Nina) and with his own past (Nicholas–Before, the child’s voice) without denying or erasing the trauma (Herman 286). In terms of the monomyth, this is no longer a descent into the underworld, but the beginning of a return with new knowledge — what Campbell calls “the crossing of the return threshold” (Campbell 188). From an Aristotelian perspective, a form of anagnorisis—“a change from ignorance to knowledge”—occurs here (Aristotle 2324): not a sudden recognition of “who the murderer is” or “who the hero is”, but a gradual recognition of his own integrity — that the old and new Nicholas do not annihilate one another, but can coexist within a single subject. This internal denouement prepares the possibility of a different kind of catharsis than in classical tragedy: not final death, but the acceptance of a new life in a radically altered form.

Block 7. The New Universe and the Law of Love (Scenes 22–24)

The final block is philosophical and ontological. In Scene 22, the Doctor tells Nicholas that he created the world out of love and abundance, but did not create borders, greed, or wars; it was humans who “filled this world with hatred and the smell of corpses” and now live in a world of their own making. Nicholas responds that he is “a child of this world” and could not know he was doing evil, being certain he was doing good. Here, war is explicitly named as a human creation, not a divine design.

In Scene 24, after a brief scene of the nurse's departure and the Assistant's remark with a Gospel quotation, the Doctor pronounces the key phrase: if Nicholas wants to change the world, he needs to "introduce the world to them" — to present a different reality to those who will come after him. To the hero's direct question, "How do I begin?", the Doctor refers him to a biblical gesture: "Once I said, 'Let there be light.'" In response, Nicholas formulates his own act of creation: "Let there be love." This ending cements the hero's new identity — that of a co-creator of a universe in which love becomes the primary law.

In Herman's framework, this corresponds to the third stage of recovery, "reconnection," in which the survivor, having integrated the traumatic past, turns toward the tasks of finding his new mission, creating a future, developing a new self and new relationships, and often discovering a sense of mission that transforms trauma into a source of meaning and articulates an alternative world order (Herman 303). In terms of the monomyth, it is both "return with the boon" and "freedom to live": Nicholas does not return to his former life, but gains the freedom to live on with new knowledge and a new task — to sustain and spread the universe of love he has created (Campbell 205).

In Aristotelian terms, the action here reaches a conclusion (teleion): the tragic event is neither undone nor "repaired", but a new order is born from it, in which suffering is not devalued but transformed into a source of ethical choice (Aristotle 2320-2322). In classical theory, tragedy is defined as the imitation of a serious, complete action that, "through pity and fear", accomplishes a catharsis of such emotions (Aristotle 2320). In this play, catharsis arises not from the hero's death or punishment, but from his inner consent to live on and from the audience's

capacity to share this decision, so that the tragic form is reoriented from a mechanism of punishment and purification to a means of restoration and the continuation of life.

Thus, the play's final plot is subordinated to the logic of post-traumatic, non-linear recovery. At the same time, the tragic structure in the Aristotelian sense remains recognizable: there is a unified internal action, scenes of suffering, gradual recognition, and catharsis, but all of these are subordinated not to punishment, but to the task of integrating traumatic experience. This, in my view, is where the play's primary therapeutic and tragic potential lies.

5.3 Character Analysis

Profound trauma, similar to the one experienced by the protagonist, shakes the fundamental perception of identity, life, and death. To address this level of discourse, it is necessary that the dramatic space not only confront individual destinies but also phenomena and concepts—such as Life, Death, God, Love, Light, and Shadow. Therefore, the play's main characters embody a dual identity: they exist simultaneously as real human beings and as symbolic forces. Through those interactions, the protagonist's character is revealed, and his new identity is formed.

Nicholas, the protagonist, is crippled by trauma—he lost all his limbs and his sight in the war. He is a composite figure representing those who sacrificed their bodies, health, and former identities in the struggle against evil. His extreme mutilation is deliberately chosen to render him entirely dependent while still retaining the ability to hear and speak. His loss of sight directs his perception inward, connecting him to the world of memory and imagination. Thus, flashbacks

become indistinguishable from hallucinations, and the boundary between external reality and inner vision dissolves. As a result, the play's action unfolds in a space populated not only by real-world images but, above all, by visions arising within Nicholas' consciousness. The name Nicholas is chosen deliberately—it is a reference to Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker, the patron saint of travellers and the wrongfully condemned.

Nicholas–Before, the antagonist is not an external enemy but an alter ego—the protagonist's shadow side—embodying shame, guilt, regret, pain, and the desire for self-destruction. He is the voice of trauma that resists healing, blaming the victim for the mere fact of survival and the fatal error—hamartia—that led to the catastrophe. Their confrontation is not a struggle between two people, but a clash of two identities: the protagonist's present, evolving self and his past, lost one. Nicholas–Before's ultimate goal is to push Nicholas toward transformation, whatever that transformation may be—a rebirth or a descent into death. On the other hand, the protagonist's victory in the struggle for a new identity is possible only through the integration of his past experiences—through symbolic reconciliation with the antagonist.

Nina, Nicholas's beloved, embodies love not as a feeling but as an inner choice. She is the archetype of a woman who remains by her beloved's side despite his mutilation, expressing love through faithfulness. Her ultimate goal is to rediscover her beloved in his new identity. The name Nina was deliberately chosen: the shared first syllable with Nicholas symbolizes the union of the animus and anima, terms Jung coined to denote the masculine and feminine sides of the same psyche. This symbolism emphasizes that Nina's love for Nicholas contributes to his restoration to wholeness.

Doctor Petro Vasylovych represents a Gnostic image of the Demiurge—a God among men, the creator of an imperfect world, who suffers from the limitations of his own creation. As a Demiurge, he is imprisoned within this world, burdened by its flaws and his inability to perfect it. He continues his earthly service and requires a human being, Nicholas, as a partner in the process of correction, as a redeemer of God through knowledge. The name Petro alludes to the Apostle Peter. Just as the Apostle Peter is a man of doubt, betrayal, and repentance, so Doctor Petro Vasilyevich embodies the human aspect of divine service.

The Doctor's **Assistant** personifies Death. She brings closure to what has lost its meaning. Her presence is not ominous but inevitable—like the breath of time itself. She cannot be resisted by force; only meaning can stand against her. Therefore, to survive, Nicholas must discover a new meaning—one stronger than fear and pain. The Assistant has no name, only a function. This is symbolic: to know Death's name is to give it form and thus to bring it closer. Namelessness preserves distance, turning death from a person into a phenomenon, a force.

Nurse Zinaida Yegorivna—simple, calm, patient—personifies Life. She doesn't philosophize, doesn't save, doesn't seek meaning—she does her job, caring for the wounded day after day. There's no heroism or ultimate goal in her service – it's a natural act. The name Zinaida is of ancient Greek origin and means "belonging to Zeus," "born of Zeus." It's a reference to the divine nature of life.

The Chorus's six actors perform multiple roles: Nicholas's limbs and eyes, his brothers-in-arms, the President with his entourage, or abstract figures embodying the voice of his mind or hallucinations. Such an approach emphasizes the fluidity and instability of Nicholas's consciousness and blurs the line between reality and Nicholas's visions. This method of

organizing the chorus's dramatic space is intended to emphasize the hero's inner world, distorted by trauma, pain, and medication. It also emphasizes the fragmented nature of trauma, which distorts the hero's reality depending on their physical and emotional state.

The limbs and eyes Nicholas lost are the voices of the missing body parts, as numerous sources confirm that people, after amputation, often experience a sense of presence of their missing body parts. This phenomenon, known as phantom limb, has been widely studied in neurology and psychology. V.S. Ramachandran describes how amputees continue to feel their missing limbs, as if these body parts retain a kind of pain memory (Ramachandran and Blakeslee, 24, 51-52). Interviews with Ukrainian veterans who had undergone amputation reveal that they experienced a profound sense of loss, resisted the amputation, and articulated complex emotional reactions regarding their lost limbs (Суспільне Івано-Франківськ; [Автор канала невідомий]; Устименко; Рябошапко). The lost parts thus become witnesses who continue to talk, and, in this context, giving voice to the missing limbs in Nicholas's story is not simply a metaphorical device, but an attempt to restore dialogue between the survivor and the lost.

Nicholas's brothers-in-arms each represent a distinct human type — a combination of age, temperament, and social background — drawn from people I observed fighting for Ukraine's independence. Their call signs — **Gramps**, **Pikachu**, **Bolt**, **Demon**, **Red**, and **Kid** — are real names taken from documentary sources.

The President and the **President's entourage** are satirical figures that embody the current government's narcissism and unprofessionalism.

Together, these characters form a psychological microcosm of the protagonist's fragmented consciousness. Each personifies an essential emotional, moral, or metaphysical aspect, and their presence contributes to the protagonist's progress toward recovery.

5.4 Symbols, Archetypes and Metaphors

The play’s dramaturgy also relies on a system of symbols, archetypes, and metaphors that are crucial in the context of traumatic experience. They create a second level of the text in which the physical and psychological consequences of trauma are unfolded and expanded. In this section, I focus on several of them: blindness, the dismembered body, the power of words, the God–Death–Life triad, as well as children’s voices and grotesque figures of power. The overarching metaphor is healing as the creation of a new inner universe governed by love.

5.4.1 Blindness and Inner Vision

One of the play’s central symbols is blindness. Nicholas is blinded by war, and his blindness is not simply physical: he is also ethically and ontologically blind, deprived of a basic way of orienting himself in reality. To return to life, he must learn to see from within. Political blindness is rooted in this ethical and social blindness. The President, visiting a wounded soldier, does not see him as a human being but as a tool for self-promotion. He personifies a corrupt, self-obsessed government and, at the same time, a part of society that chooses to ignore the real horror of war. Nicholas’s physical blindness thus rhymes with the blindness of political power and of those who refuse to see the consequences of their own decisions.

Against the backdrop of Nicholas's blindness, a line of inner vision gradually develops. Deprived of his eyes, the hero is forced to "see" the world through dialogues with the Doctor and the Assistant, encounters with Nicholas–Before, and flashes of documentary testimony from children. This transforms his inner space into a place where what he previously preferred to ignore becomes visible. Blindness allows Nicholas to perceive and acknowledge what others turn away from; it becomes not only the result of loss but also the precondition for an inner epiphany.

5.4.2 Loss of a Coherent Body Image and a Fragmented Self

Nicholas's body has been radically mutilated: he has lost all four limbs and his sight, and his body is no longer whole. Yet the play goes beyond simply describing disability: the missing body parts acquire independent voices. The chorus of arms, legs, and eyes, scattered across the battlefield and the forest, continues to "speak", describing their physical and mental suffering, their decay, their being devoured by animals. This chorus of limbs and organs can be read as a chorus of multiple losses. Each severed arm or leg embodies a separate episode of experience that cannot be "sewn back" into a coherent narrative. On the level of form, this emphasizes that each loss remains visible and receives a voice. Nothing that has been violently taken simply disappears: it is precisely the absence of what is dear — the body, people, the future — that becomes the most vivid testimony to the violence committed, impossible to erase.

Nicholas's psyche is also fragmented by trauma, torn between the present and the past, between the Nicholas "now" and Nicholas–Before. Like his physical body, his identity

disintegrates into fragments, each making its own claims and registering its own affects: guilt and hatred, a wish for death, memories of happiness, professional military pride, and the shame of helplessness in front of Nina. Within the play, these fragments collide, creating a sense of continuous internal conflict rather than a stable, unified self.

Nicholas's multiple amputations are irreversible: neither prosthetics nor medicine can restore his former body. From the outset, therefore, the mythic scenario of a "miraculous recovery" collapses. Any restoration and integration become possible only at the level of meaning — through a new orientation in life and a new principle of relation to the world. The healing that remains imaginable is not the return of the old body, but the gathering of a shattered self around a different, consciously chosen centre.

5.4.3. Voice, Word, and the Creation of a New Reality

Because of losing his limbs and sight, Nicholas's primary remaining means of perceiving the world is his hearing, and his sole access to others is through speech. The trajectory of this voice throughout the play, therefore, becomes crucial. The opening scenes are saturated with aggression, despair, and sarcastic humour. Nicholas describes the horrific facts of war in graphic detail. His unjust accusations wound Nina, leaving her disgusted and powerless. In dialogues with the nurse and the Doctor, he tries to use his voice as a weapon — to devalue, to humiliate, to force those around him to acknowledge the meaninglessness of his existence, and ideally to help him die. At this stage, the word appears primarily as an instrument of violence, turned against both himself and others.

Gradually, in the second half of the play, Nicholas's voice begins to change its function. Dialogues with Nina shift from mutual accusations toward the acknowledgement of shared vulnerability; the conversation with the nurse acquires not only raw physiological, but also philosophical depth; the argument with the Doctor and the Assistant leads to a reconsideration of his relationship with God and with death. The hero discovers that speech is not only a means of destruction, but also his last remaining instrument of creation. The words he speaks cannot restore his body or resurrect his fallen comrades, but they can establish a new order for his life.

The culmination of this development is the final formula, "Let there be love." Here, the word functions as a performative act: an utterance that does not merely describe reality but itself does something in the world, "not to describe my doing … it is to do it" (Austin 3). If the biblical God says "Let there be light", initiating the creation of the world, Nicholas — deprived of a body and of the eyes with which to see this light — responds with "Let there be love", initiating the creation of a new inner universe. His words articulate the law of the new world in which he is willing to live. Through this speech act, the hero moves from the wish to disappear to the wish to create.

5.4.4 The Triad of God, Death, and Life

The triad of the Doctor, the Assistant, and the Nurse occupies a special place in the play. These characters fulfil both realistic and archetypal functions, embodying the principles of God, Death, and Life, respectively.

The Doctor is, on the one hand, an ordinary physician who measures blood pressure, prescribes medications, and discusses prosthetics. On the other hand, in several scenes, he is directly identified as God and speaks in the language of a Creator. This is not an omnipotent theological God, but a tragic God who created the possibility of goodness and abundance, yet is forced to watch as humans fill the world with hatred. Through Nicholas's dialogue with this imperfect God, the theological and existential level of the tragedy unfolds: the protagonist blames God, demands a miracle, bargains with him, and is gradually forced to acknowledge his own share of responsibility.

The Assistant acts as a figure of Death. Her functions are to accompany those who leave, to record the fact of death, to be present at the moment of transition. She insists that she does not kill anyone herself, but only "meets" those who have already been killed by illness, other people, or circumstances. Nicholas tries to accuse her of mass murder, comparing her to the aggressor president who ordered the war, but the Assistant shifts the focus back to the living — to those who make decisions, launch missiles, and pull the trigger. Death in the play is thus not a "just judge" but a radically honest witness that exposes the consequences and moral weight of human actions.

The Nurse, finally, embodies the principle of Life. She deals with the most prosaic and physiological tasks — changing diapers, monitoring nutrition, controlling bodily functions, swearing, joking. She constantly brings the hero "down to earth", back to the body, to the need to live here and now, regardless of how unbearable this life may seem. It is she who, half-jokingly, pushes him toward the idea of "inventing something that hasn't been invented yet" and toward

deciding for whom he will do it. Through the Nurse, life manifests as routine, stability, and care — everything that makes slow, everyday growth and restoration possible.

5.4.5 Steadfast Love under Trauma

Nina, Nicholas's partner, embodies the archetype of accepting, steadfast love. She remains with him after his injury, when his body has literally lost its integrity, and she tries to stay close to him despite shock, fear, and the pain of what she has seen. Nina is willing to share his daily difficulties, new limitations, and the uncertainty of the future, refusing to reduce him to his disability alone. For her, Nicholas remains the person she loves, even though his body and personality can no longer be what they were before.

Importantly, the play does not present Nina as an idealized, endlessly patient figure. In several scenes, she cannot bear Nicholas's aggression and hatred, asks him to stop speaking, and distances herself emotionally. Her love is therefore not "unconditional" in the sentimental sense; it is a difficult, ambivalent, and vulnerable choice that must be continually renewed in the face of trauma, exhaustion, and the temptation to withdraw. Precisely this tension makes Nina's position dramatically and psychologically credible.

This image is grounded in reality. During the current war, many Ukrainian women and men remain with their partners after severe injuries, rebuilding relationships and learning to love altered bodies without erasing the memory of what they once were. In this sense, Nina is not only an individual character but also a collective image of those who choose to stay, confirming

that love can survive radical life changes. Through this relationship, Nicholas comes to recognize love not as consolation or reward, but as the only foundation on which a new inner universe can be built — the universe he chooses to create in the finale.

5.4.6 Children's Voices

Documentary voice-overs featuring testimonies from Ukrainian children about war, bombings, loss, and fear, heard at the play's climax, form another kind of chorus. Using simple, everyday words taken from real interviews, the children describe destroyed homes, nights spent in basements, the deaths of loved ones, and everyday life under fire.

Within the play, these voices serve a dual function. On the one hand, they are concrete, living witnesses to war crimes. On the other hand, they become a symbol of a future systematically destroyed. Children's voices remind us that war not only kills individuals; it attacks the continuity of life itself, breaking the horizon of entire generations.

5.4.7 The Clowning of Power

The figure of the President emerges as a grotesque archetype of power. His visit to Nicholas turns into a farce: the President does not know what to do with his hands, is afraid to touch the mutilated body, wipes his palm with disgust, and speaks in empty clichés. He brings a symbolic award but is unable even to begin to understand or feel what Nicholas is going through.

The President in the play is not a demonic dictator or a cartoon villain, but a hollow figure — an upstart in power concerned only with his approval ratings and incapable of empathizing with others' losses. His scene is built on the logic of clowning: behind the pompous rhetoric and ceremonial gestures lies a frightened, petty person who tries to hide from the reality of suffering. This grotesque exposure of power highlights the systemic cruelty of a political order that exploits the victims of war as raw material for its own media image.

5.4.8 Healing Through Love

Recovery in the play is not a return to normal. Nicholas remains severely disabled; the war does not end; the dead do not rise. From a realistic perspective, his life remains extremely limited and difficult. Yet at the symbolic level, a crucial shift occurs: it is not the state of the body or the world that changes, but the foundation on which the hero builds his relationship to them.

Healing here is not reconciliation with injustice, but a willingness to acknowledge the irreversibility of trauma and to find a new source of meaning. Nicholas ultimately ceases to perceive himself only as a victim and assumes the responsibility of someone who can create something opposed to death and destruction. His instruments are no longer weapons or physical force, but words, imagination, and the capacity to love.

Thus, the symbols, metaphors, and archetypal images of the play are not decorative — they provide the archetypal and existential layer of meaning through which the plot explores questions of life, death, guilt, and love. Through them, the play suggests that recovery is possible

not as the undoing of trauma, but as a radical reorganization of the inner world and of the principles by which one relates to others.

5.5 Audience and Potential Impact

The play is intended for a global audience. The experiences it depicts — amputation, blindness, survivor's guilt, and the inability to return to one's former life — are shared by many who have lived through war, violence, or disaster in different places and times. I assume that the text can be read and performed in different languages while remaining rooted in Ukrainian reality, yet not confined to it. The context of reception will vary: for Ukrainian readers and viewers, the play can function as a form of national witnessing, while for international audiences it offers a way to encounter war not in abstract terms but through the personal tragedy of an individual.

The play's potential audience is therefore quite broad. On the one hand, it includes military veterans, whose experiences and traumas inform the text, as well as their family members. On the other hand, it includes civilian spectators who primarily encounter war through media coverage, statistics, and heroic narratives, and who may be reluctant to acknowledge the horrific and unsettling aspects of armed conflict.

When conceptualizing the play, I anticipated several possible effects. First, I wanted it to serve as a form of public recognition of the suffering of those who have lost their health and lives in the war. Second, I hoped the text might help some of those who have lost limbs or health to glimpse the possibility of hope. Third, it was important to me that the play not simply depict

trauma and leave the audience in a state of hopelessness. I wanted the creation of a new inner universe at the end of the play to suggest that life after catastrophe is possible, even if it must take a radically different form. At the same time, I did not expect the text to have a direct therapeutic effect; my aim was to create a space in which trauma could be named and seen rather than repressed or masked.

At the time of writing, I have received only a few initial responses from servicemen who have read the play. These reactions are particularly important to me, since it is this audience that has the authority to say whether the play has avoided falsehood, imitation, or the exploitation of trauma.

Even on the basis of these early responses, several tendencies can be observed. First, readers note not only the heaviness of the material, but also a sense of relief that the text does not mask the brutality of war with heroic formulas. The possibility of recognizing in the play what is usually not spoken about publicly is experienced as an act of acknowledgement.

Second, what I initially considered the riskiest elements — descriptions of the body, speeches of hatred, wishes for death — sometimes prove less traumatic for military personnel than for civilian readers. For those who have experienced war, these elements are often familiar; more painful are the scenes that concern relationships with loved ones and feelings of guilt toward family members and fallen comrades.

Finally, I did not expect that the final turn toward the creation of a new universe based on love would be perceived less as “sweet consolation” than as a difficult choice. For some readers, this section of the text becomes a point of inner resistance: accepting the possibility of love and

forgiveness after what has happened is no less difficult than acknowledging the scale of the trauma. I expect that further responses from soldiers and veterans will require additions and clarifications to this section, but it is already clear that the play's actual impact partially coincides with, and partially diverges from, what I envisaged at the conceptual stage.

5.6 Ethical Limitations and Further Audience Engagement

Since the text draws on actual testimonies and experiences of people living and dying in the current war, the risk of retraumatization is always present. Any stage adaptation of this play will therefore require careful attention to the conditions of its reception: clear content warnings, the possibility of post-performance discussions, and, where feasible, collaboration with trauma-informed professionals, mainly if the audience includes military personnel and their families.

At the same time, avoiding such texts in the name of "comfortable silence" would mean tacitly prolonging the invisibility of trauma in public space. My premise is not that the play should heal or console everyone, but that it should create a space in which the experience of war is not reduced to parades, statistics, or uplifting slogans, and where those who choose to engage with it can encounter a more complex representation of trauma.

In my view, audience engagement does not end with the written text. Readings, performances, facilitated discussions, and meetings with military and civilian audiences are necessary both to refine the presentation of the material and to clarify its place within public discourse on war trauma. The play was created as a part of such a conversation. The potential

impact of Thy Word Be Done depends not only on its content but also on the context and the ethical frameworks in which it is read and performed.

Conclusion

This dissertation arose from a need to rethink both personal and collective trauma. It is grounded in the hypothesis that three distinct models—classical tragedy (Aristotle), Campbell's monomyth, and Judith Herman's model of trauma and recovery—can be combined to create a dramatic form capable of artistically and credibly conveying post-traumatic experience and possible movement toward recovery. The aim was not simply to illustrate these theories, but to test their synthesis in practice by developing a play about a soldier who experiences catastrophic physical injury and psychological trauma during the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The research preceding the play's development highlighted structural parallels among the post-traumatic experience, the monomyth, and Aristotelian principles. The resulting theoretical framework served as a productive basis for the play's dramaturgical design. Documentary materials provided a factual foundation, a layer of authenticity and a source of the specific military language. The initial linear plot helped to clarify the protagonist's story as a whole and to outline the approximate trajectory of his recovery. However, as the writing progressed, it became apparent that such a structure could not adequately capture post-traumatic reality, with its fragmentation, cyclicality, and resistance to recovery. In later drafts, the structure and emotional dynamics of post-traumatic experience became the play's primary organizing logic, and the text moved toward a fragmented, repetitive, and inwardly focused composition that more closely reflects the fractured temporality characteristic of PTSD (Caruth 61-65).

This process led to several important observations. First, the three chosen models proved capable of functioning as complementary lenses. From tragedy, the play retains the unity of

internal action, scenes of suffering and recognition, and a concept of catharsis (Aristotle 2320-2321); from the monomyth, it borrows a trajectory from call ot adventure toward a new return and freedom to live a new life (Campbell 210); from Herman's framework, it takes the insistence on stages of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection, while also acknowledging the nonlinearity and inherent incompleteness of this process (Herman 223-285). Second, the writing process itself demonstrated how trauma shapes the play's textual form: fragmentation, repetition, hallucination, and a tendency toward incompleteness emerged as themes and structural principles governing the plot's development.

The resulting play occupies a space at the intersection of genres: part classical tragedy, part mythic journey, part documentary drama, and part post-traumatic drama with elements of epic theatre. Overall, the text seeks to convey the post-traumatic experience with emotional intensity and as much authenticity as possible. Preliminary responses, particularly from Ukrainian military readers, suggest that the play largely avoids distortion and sentimentalization. The decision not to veil the brutality of war with heroic formulas has been perceived as an important aspect of recognition. At the same time, the final turn toward love has been read as a difficult and internally doubted possibility. At the same time, these early reactions remain limited in both number and context. The actual impact of Thy Word Be Done can be fully assessed only through future productions, careful ethical reflection, and ongoing dialogue with veterans, their families, and civilian audiences.

In this sense, the work remains deliberately open. The hypothesis that tragedy, reinterpreted through trauma theory and the monomyth, can offer a form for artistic representation, contributory, in a limited way, to the processing of war trauma, finds initial

support in this project, but needs further definitive confirmation. Both the play and the conceptual framework developed in this dissertation require further testing—in rehearsal rooms, in performance, and in sustained conversations with those whose experiences it seeks to witness.

Appendix 1: Initial Plot and Structural Integration of Tragedy, Monomyth, and Trauma Models

1. Planning the Future

The scene establishes a state of equilibrium that will later be shattered. The protagonist is planning a happy future with his fiancée. Suddenly, the Russian-Ukrainian war begins.

2. Decision to Enlist (Act of Shame)

The protagonist decides to enlist, despite his fiancée's counterarguments, to secure future glory and legitimize his hatred of the enemies.

3. Awakening in the Hospital

The protagonist awakens in the hospital after the injury, blind and with multiple limbs amputated, disoriented and shocked by the grasp of what has happened to him.

4. Fear and Denial

Initially, the protagonist rejects his new reality, struggles with fear and denial, and refuses to accept it, torn between chaos and terror, and desperate attempts to "wake up" from this state.

5. Pain and Grief

The protagonist experiences overwhelming physical and emotional pain, with intrusive flashbacks to his former happy life, and sinks deeper into grief over the loss of his body, his future, and his former self.

6. Fighting with Demons

The protagonist embarks on an inner journey, confronting his demons in dialogues with God, Death, his dead brothers in arms, figures from his past, and even his absent limbs and eyes, as his guilt, shame, and anger intensify.

7. Loss of Meaning

The protagonist gradually begins to acknowledge the reality of his condition, but this "acceptance" is unstable: behind it remain despair, emotional numbness, and the feeling that life has lost its meaning.

8. Total Collapse

A profound sense of uselessness torments the protagonist, and he is terrified of a monotonous, meaningless future, reaching the lowest point of his psychological abyss.

9. Lullaby Story

The protagonist thinks about kids who were injured during the Russian bombing. He wants to support them and create a lullaby dedicated to a young girl who has grown up too fast because of

the war. He finds that by giving hope to others, he regains his own. The nurse who listens to this song finds it amazing, validating the first step to recovery.

10. Ancestors' Call (Climax)

In his dreams, the protagonist encounters a kobzar who embodies the voices of ancestors. He connects the protagonist to his cultural heritage and helps him realize that his voice can carry the memory and stories of his people.

11. New Purpose

Recognizing the power of his new gift, the protagonist embraces a new calling: to become a storyteller who can bear witness to the war and inspire others.

12. First Performance

The protagonist makes his first performance, transforming his trauma into narrative and song, and publicly confronting his story before an audience.

13. Farewell Speech

Addressing the audience directly, the protagonist speaks of universal values, historical heritage, and a shared future, thereby completing his transformation and offering catharsis.

Table A1.1. Structural Integration of the Initial Plot Across Tragic, Mythic, and Trauma-Recovery Frameworks

#	Plot Stage	Symptoms of Psychological Trauma (after Herman, DSM-5, and van der Kolk)	Stages of Grief (Kübler-Ross)	Stages of Recovery (Herman)	Campbell's Monomyth	Aristotelian Part (Beginning / Middle / End)	Key Aristotelian Concept (Hamartia / Pathos / Peripeteia / Anagnorisis / Catharsis)
1	Planning the Future	—	—	—	World of Common Day	Beginning	Equilibrium
2	Decision to Enlist (Act of Shame)	—	—	—	Call to Adventure; Refusal of the Call; Supernatural Aid; Crossing of the First Threshold	Beginning – transition toward the Middle	Hamartia – decision to enlist, coloured by shame and the desire for glory
3	Awakening in the Hospital	Shock, denial, dissociation	Denial	—	Beginning of the Road of Trials	Middle	Emergence of Pathos
4	Fear and Denial	Confusion, cognitive impairment	Denial	—	Road of Trials	Middle (rising action/ complication	Unfolding Pathos
5	Pain and Grief	Anger, irritability, intrusive memories	Anger	—	Road of Trials	Middle (rising action)	Pathos
6	Fighting with Demons	Anxiety, guilt, shame, self-blame	Bargaining	—	Road of Trials (deepening)	Middle (rising action / internal conflict)	Intensified Pathos
7	Loss of Meaning	Withdrawal, numbness	Depression	—	Atonement with the Father	Middle (late complication)	Pathos (approaching crisis)
8	Total Collaps	Hopelessness, disconnection	Depression	—	The Ordeal (Collapse)	Middle (crisis)	Culmination of Pathos
9	Lullaby Story	Emotional softening, first stabilization	Acceptance	Safety & Stabilization	Preparation for Boon	Middle – transition toward the End	Precondition for Peripeteia

10	Ancestors' Call (Climax)	Regaining coherence	—	Remembrance & Mourning	Apotheosis (Revelation)	Apex of the Middle	Peripeteia and Anagnorisis
11	New Purpose	Restored agency	—	Reconnection & Integration	The Ultimate Boon	End (falling action/ beginning of resolution)	Continuation of Anagnorisis
12	First Performance	Integration of memory	—	Integration Continues	Crossing of the Return Threshold	End	Onset of Catharsis
13	Farewell Speech	Post-traumatic growth	—	Full Integration	Freedom to Live	End (resolution)	Completion of Catharsis

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