Yara Arts Group debuts UKR-Co Lab experimental series focused on bandura music and poetry

Virlana Tkacz recites her poetry from "Three Wooden Trunks."

Pavlo Terekhov

Julian Kytasty plays the bandura as Anastasia Voytyuk listens.

by Olenka Tsyhankova

NEW YORK – On a warm, windy evening in late November, the lights were on unusually late in the New York branch office of the Selfreliance Association of American Ukrainians at 98 Second Avenue.

An audience filled the room as artists played banduras and read poetry. The music and poetry were new, part of Yara Arts Group's experimental series UKR-Co Lab, which was created to provide a space for those fascinated with the power of words and music who wanted to read, play and show their most recent works, whether they were already developed or simply initial ideas.

Virlana Tkacz, the founding and artistic director of Yara Arts Group, introduced the series with her usual welcome greeting. Diana Chipak, the co-host and representative of the Selfreliance Association, welcomed everyone in the space on November 20.

Julian Kytasty, a renowned master of the bandura, described the history of the Kharkiv-style bandura. He played a few improvisational pieces before stopping to talk about his experiments and experiences with the instrument. His improvisations are attempts to expand the Kharkiv bandura's repertoire and explore the instrument's possibilities. Mr. Kytasty said traditional players of the bandura, known as kobzari, would play the instrument with unique tunings seldom used today.

Ms. Tkacz related the news about the recent publication of Yara's translations of Serhiy Zhadan's poetry in Irish Pages, a famous biannual poetry journal. The current issue, "War in Europe," opens with four poems by Mr. Zhadan translated by Wanda Phipps and Ms. Tkacz.

Ms. Phipps recited Mr. Zhadan's poem "A Glow from a Twig."

"It was time to talk about how we all change," Ms. Phipps said as her warm voice filled the room and Mr. Kytasty softly strummed his bandura strings, creating a beautiful background melody that cradled the words.

Ms. Phipps also recited one of the poems from her new chapbook, "Write Three Poems and Call Me in the Morning." That poem was recently published in the online journal Arts Fuse. One of Mr. Zhadan's poems was also published there.

After Ms. Phipps finished her reading, Ms. Tkacz introduced her book of poetry, "Three Wooden Trunks." The title is a reference to the three trunks Ms. Tkacz's mom brought with her when the family first came to New York. The book's first section is a collection of stories about the family's first days in the city, documented by Ms. Tkacz and turned into poetry. The poem was about her mom's first job interview in the city.

The book's second section addresses Ms. Tkacz's childhood in Newark, N.J., and her experience in a Ukrainian school.

"I hid my tears when Mrs. Kolenska read out loud the works of writers of the Executed Renaissance. Writing was a dangerous profession, and so was speaking Ukrainian. And weren't we lucky we could do both," Ms. Tkacz writes in reference to the generation of Ukrainian language poets, writers and artists of the 1920s and early 1930s who were killed by the Soviet regime.

Continuing the theme of the Executed

Yara Arts Group...

Renaissance anniversary, Ms. Tkacz read another of Mr. Zhadan's poems printed in Irish Pages. That poem, "A Forest Surrounds Poets," commemorates members of the Executed Renaissance.

Anastasia Voytyuk was the night's special guest. Known as BanduraGirl, Ms. Voytyuk, who is from Lviv, Ukraine, introduced her newest ideas and talked about her recent concerts in Ukraine with Mr. Kytasty. She shared the significance of lyrics in Ukrainian songs and their messages.

According to organizers of the series, UKR Co-Lab is meant to give artists an opportunity to test work and collaborations they are developing in an experimental setting. Events in the series will continue on January 15.