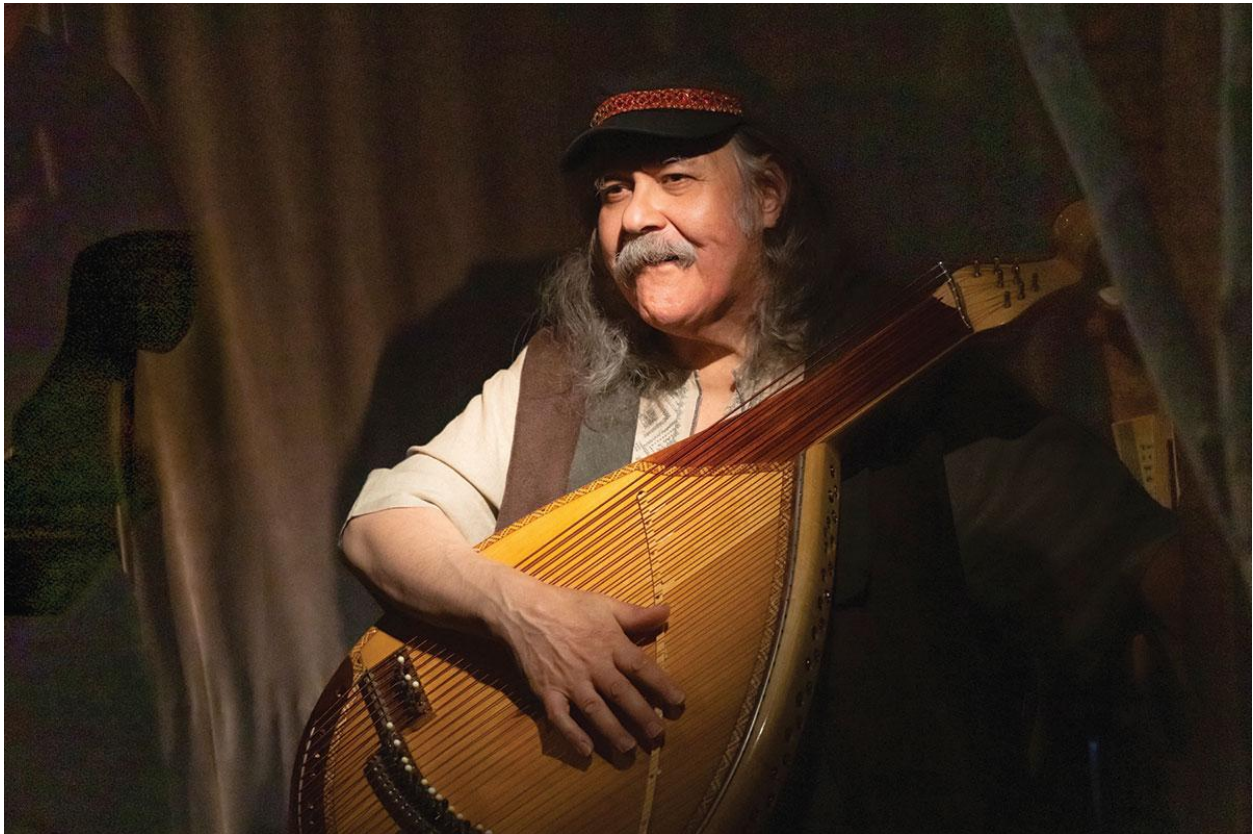


Yara Arts Group's 'Slap!' tells the story of David Burliuk using the vivid experience of music

By [Olena Jennings](#) February 21, 2025 2:47 am, February 22, 2025 print edition Ukrainian Weekly



Steven Pisano Julian Kytasty plays bandura in "SLAP!" at East Village Basement in New York City.

NEW YORK – Yara Arts Group's "Slap!," which was performed in the East Village Basement from January 23-February 9, features Bob Holman as David Burliuk, Susan Hwang as the Scythian Viper Woman, and Julian Kytasty as Mamai. It was created by the cast together with the director Virlana Tkacz.

"Slap!" tells the story of Ukrainian Futurist David Burliuk (1882-1967) by digging into the past through the vivid experience of music. Mr. Burliuk was a poet, painter and organizer of Futurism. His father managed the largest estate in the modern-day area of Kherson, Ukraine, called Hylaea by the ancient Greeks. Mr. Burliuk's early paintings show Fauvist and Cubist influences, as well as a fascination with Scythian culture. He took part in many excavations of the Scythian burial mounds that are spread across the Kherson area.

In the performance, he is slapped by a Scythian viper woman, a moment that connects him with the Scythian myth of creation. When he is slapped, Futurism is created. The slap also represents, as the characters recite, "a slap in the face of public taste," part of the Futurist Manifesto, revealing the way that Futurism was viewed with apprehension because it went against the norms of the time. It was an assault on complacency.

The East Village Basement is a precious space with history. Ms. Tkacz explained that the first La MaMa shows actually took place in that basement in 1961. Yara Arts Group is currently a resident company of La MaMa.

The creation of the show was an interactive process. The actors worked to create the songs that feature in the production. The production was built from an earlier version performed in 2019.

The music begins with Julian Kytasty's masterful bandura playing. Mr. Kytasty is Mamai from one of Mr. Burliuk's paintings, a character that Mr. Burliuk admired because of his self-sufficiency, and begins to tell Mr. Burliuk's story through a combination of song and narrative. The story begins in Kherson in southern Ukraine and moves through Siberia, Japan and ends in New York's East Village where Mr. Burliuk finds himself in 1922. He was an active participant in avant-garde exhibitions in the places he traveled.

The music continues with songs composed individually by the actors. Ms. Hwang, founder and producer of the literature-inspired arts non-profit The Bushwick Book Club, plays accordion and drums as she sings songs like "Viper Woman Song" giving breath to her character dressed in a silver gown sourced by costume designer Keiko Obremski.



Susan Hwang (left) and Bob Holman in "SLAP!" at East Village Basement in New York City.

The work was created by Mr. Holman, Ms. Hwang, Julian Kytasty and Virlana Tkacz, and is directed by Ms. Tkacz.

Mr. Holman, a New York poet best known for his spoken word pieces, uses his talent to write songs. He wrote the words to the catchy and rhythmical “We Are the Scythians” to which Mr. Kytasty composed the music. He also brings energy and passion to the performance.

Watoku Ueno, who was one of the founding members of Yara Arts Group, designed a minimalist set that focused on light and shadow. The white paper set flows around the seating area and, with one of Darien Fiorino’s projections, touches the ceiling with stars. One of the remarkable scenes features the characters traveling on a train, their shadows passing in front of the audience.

Other projections that Mr. Fiorino, who worked on an earlier version of “Slap!,” shows give us lessons in art history, moving through impressionism, post-impressionism and cubism. The most awe-inspiring projections feature photographs from the time of Mr. Burliuk’s travels.

This production is highly engaging. At one point, it requires audience participation to vote with the Futurist dollars found in the program for the next turn in the story. The intimate space involves the audience effortlessly, but the energy the actors put into the performance creates a memorable piece. The songs are available as tracks to purchase and download so that the audience can take the experience with them. Whether you choose to purchase them or not, after you hear them, they will be running through your head.