

Create Conversations
- & -
Increase Understanding with Theatre



OUR GRATITUDE

Persephone Theatre is located on the beautiful lands of Indigenous peoples who have lived here since time immemorial, including the Nêhiyawak, Nêhithawak, Anishinabek, Nakawe, Nakota, Nehinawak, Lakota, Dakota and Dene peoples. This place is also the homeland of the Métis. At Persephone, we also like to acknowledge the contributions of the Whitecap Dakota and Round Prairie Métis peoples in establishing our city of Saskatoon. Persephone Theatre is located on Treaty 6 territory and is committed to living in good relations with our Indigenous neighbours, in the spirit with which the Treaties were intended.

TIPS BEFORE SEEING THE SHOW

We recommend discussing

- The synopsis
- Pre show Activity
- Going over theatre etiquette.

THEATRE ETTIQUETTE

This is not like watching a movie- the actors can see and hear you.

- Don't put phones on silent -turn them OFF. The actors can see your screens light up.
- No talking- the actors can hear you and so can your fellow audience members. Even the quietest whisper is distracting.
- There is food served at the concession for you to enjoy during the show. Please be mindful of the noise the packaging can make. Open your bags, packages, and lids before the show starts. Once they are empty put them under your seat, behind your feet where you are less likely to step on them or knock them over.
- Try to use the washroom before the show starts or after the Q&A. If you cannot wait, try to leave the theatre discreetly. Our lobby volunteers will let you know when it is ok to go back to your seat.

Now for the Fun Stuff

- Theatre is meant to be taken in, an experience.
- If you find something funny it is perfectly acceptable to laugh, the actors appreciate hearing your laughter. Just be mindful that you are being respectful and not laughing over top of dialogue.
- You may feel happy or sad at certain points in the story - this is a good thing. Theatre is meant to make us feel.
- There is wonderful theatre magic that happens in a play and we love to share how we did it with you. The Q&A is for you - If you are curious about something be sure to ask about it. This is an opportunity to find out things such as how something was made, how the actors came up with a character or a moment in the play.

SYNOPSIS

After meeting on a theatre research trip in Kyiv, Canadian Playwright Matthew Mackenzie and Ukrainian actor Mariya Khumutova spark up a romance, which takes them from the beaches of the Black Sea to the riverbanks of the North Saskatchewan River, through the onset of a global pandemic and the eruption of a brutal war, plus many moments of joy throughout, including marriage and the birth of their son.

Based on actual events, this captivating real-life love story is set against the backdrop of the COVID pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Award-winning playwright Matthew MacKenzie joins forces with his wife, award-winning Ukrainian actor Mariya Khomutova, to tell the story of their courtship and share an intimate perspective on the personal impacts of the war in Ukraine.

CONTENT ADVISORY

Our two main characters Matt and Masha share descriptions of Crimea invasion; the Russia invasion of Ukraine in 2022; of Ukrainian people navigating war zones and looking for lost loved ones; Masha's mother and friends escaping Ukraine; the trials of Matt and Masha and their loved ones trying to travel to one another to escape the war during the Covid-19 pandemic; the complications Masha experiences with immigration and trying to receive Canadian citizenship; Masha's mother and Ukrainian refugees struggling with not being home while their loved ones suffer in Ukraine; and PTSD from war.

One curse word: Motherf#cker (while referring to Putin).

IMPORTANT NOTE: Despite the subject matter touching on heavy topics, this play is a charming love story with lots of humorous moments- a 'rom-com' if you will!

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Matthew MacKenzie - *Writer and Performer*

Matthew MacKenzie is a citizen of the Métis Nation of Alberta and proud father of Ivan (Eevan, Vanya, Vanichka). Artistic Director of Punctuate! Theatre, Matthew is also the founder and an Artistic Associate with Pyretic Productions, a founding member of the Pemmican Collective, as well as Canadian Liaison of the Liberian Dance Troupe. Matt's plays include Bears, After the Fire and The Particulars.

Mariya Khomutova - *Writer and Performer*

Mariya Khomutova started her theatre studies in Odesa at the age of 12. She graduated from the Kyiv National Theatre University in 2012 and worked in two repertoire theatres in Kyiv. Some of the favourite roles she has played are Agafya Tikhonovna (The Marriage by N.Gogol), Grushenka (The Karamasov Brothers by F. Dostoyevsky), Dunyasha (Cherry Orchard by A. Chekhov), Irodiada (Salome by O.Wilde). In 2020, Mariya was the recipient of a Golden Duke Award from the Odesa Film Festival for Best Actress in Two of Us (dir. Vladislav Vitriv).

PRESHOW CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

- Share Synopsis with Students
- Watch the video *'Putin's war on Ukraine'*
- Read the article *How Canada responded to the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis*
- Remind students of the travel bans and difficulties during the pandemic
- Read the *front mezz junkies theatre blog* beforehand.

WATCH

[Video Putin's war on Ukraine, explained](#)

READ

[How Canada has responded to Ukranian refugee crisis](#)

READ

[The Unpacking of the First Métis Man of Odesa, An Interview](#)

Interview from 'front mezz junkies theatre blog'

March 25, 2023

By Ross

Punctuate! Theatre is unpacking a love story. A love story about a couple. A love story about Ukraine. And a love story against an unbelievably complicated backdrop. Starting at The Theatre Centre in Toronto, the company is ushering forth the world premiere of [First Métis Man of Odesa](#) before it spins itself out on stages across Canada. Spanning continents and set against the backdrop of the COVID pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Métis playwright and Punctuate! Artistic Director, Matthew MacKenzie (Dora Award-winning playwright for *Bears*, *After the Fire*, *The Particulars*) joins forces with his wife, the award-winning Ukrainian actress Mariya Khomutova (Odesa Film Festival Grand Prix – The Golden Duke award-winner *NONNA*, *Two People*), to tell the story of their COVID courtship and share an intimate perspective on the personal impacts of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Drawn from their real-life love story, a story that is ultimately still unfolding to this very day, *First Métis Man of Odesa* unpacks the journey of Matt and Masha's love, that spans continents where distance and conflicts can't tame their passionate connection. After meeting on a theatre research trip in Kyiv, a spark is struck, and a romance between a Métis Playwright and a Ukrainian artist is ignited, taking them from the beaches of the Black Sea to the banks of the North Saskatchewan River, within the onset of a global pandemic, the eruption of a brutal war, but also the many joyous moments that this union begets, including marriage and the birth of their son.

During the height of the lockdown in 2021, an initial version of this piece was presented as a radio play at Factory Theatre, written by MacKenzie and directed by Nina Lee Aquino. This March, *First Métis Man of Odesa*, as directed by Lianna Makuch (Pyretic Productions/Punctuate!'s *Barvinok*), makes its stage debut, offering a compelling continuation of the initial story told in that first radio play. The couple, Matthew MacKenzie and his wife, Mariya Khomutova, sat down with Frontmezzjunkies and thankfully answered a few questions about their incredible journey from that first love-struck connection to its World Premiere at The Theatre Centre in Toronto.

Tell me, how you decided to embark on telling your own story and what the beginning of this creative process looked like for you two?

Initially, Matt wrote an audio play for Factory Theatre about our romance, then getting married and having our son during the pandemic. The plan had been to expand the piece for the stage, a plan that took on much urgency after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Both the pandemic and war have a deeply dehumanizing effect, so our hope in telling our love story is to share the human side of these major world events; a human side that headlines and news clips can't fully capture.

What aspect of your character, or your involvement with/creation of this play resonates the most powerfully inside you?

For both of us, the opportunity to share all the joy, humour, anger, and frustration we've experienced in the past few years is a really therapeutic process. Many of our friends and family only know snippets of what we've been through, so the opportunity to tell our story across the country is one we are deeply grateful for.

The phrase "you don't know what someone is carrying with them" has really hit home over the past couple of years, as we have had to contend with some pretty epic challenges as a couple and as individuals.

Tell me a bit about what it is like to bring your character to the stage? What does mean to you to be telling this story?

We play ourselves in the play, but we very much play versions of ourselves in the play. We had to mine conflict between us out of a few outbursts, as there haven't actually been a lot of [conflicts] in our relationship so that we could bring the drama of what we are going through to the fore.

Challenges of playing ourselves have included the fact that [Matt] is not a trained actor, while Mariya is. Mariya though comes from a theatre tradition that was almost entirely focused on the classics, so playing herself in a play based on her life is definitely a new and challenging experience!

Tell me a bit more about your development process? Was there a typical 'first read' or was it different, given your own story inspired the work...

We were able to conduct several development workshops over a period of six months. There was no shortage of content that we could derive from our lives, so the challenge was determining what to keep and what to let fall away. Even after our first read, we cut 15 pages from our rehearsal draft. Events in our lives and in Ukraine will no doubt continue to necessitate the evolution of our script.

What's been the most challenging part of this process for you?

For Mariya, it was buying into the idea (that is quite a common one in Canada) that a play about someone's real life can be art. Seeing Hailey Gillis's *My Ex-boyfriend Yard Sale*, really helped her believe this was possible.

For Matt, it met the challenge of performing for the first time in ten years. The last time he performed, he made his friends promise they would never let him perform again, but all agreed it didn't make much sense for anyone else to play him in this piece.

The most rewarding?

Having already performed several shows in Kamloops, the most rewarding part of this process is sharing this story with refugees from Ukraine. Their responses have been incredible and have really encouraged us to share our story with as many people as possible.

What do you want the audience to get from this play, and from your character?

We want the audience to join us as we relive our sweeping love story, from Odesa to Toronto. We want the audience to see the human side of the conflict in Ukraine. And we want the audience to leave the theatre with the hope that love can and will conquer all.

POST SHOW ACTIVITIES

RE-READ & REFLECT

RE-READ the front mezz junkies theatre blog. Then REFLECT on the show and whether or not the creators and performers from the First Metis Man of Odessa achieved their goal-“Both the pandemic and war have a deeply dehumanizing effect, so our hope in telling our love story is to share the human side of these major world events; a human side that headlines and news clips can’t fully capture.”

DISCUSS

How did the writers and performers achieve creating a play this joyful and funny while also dealing with difficult events (reflect on music, set, humour, specific moments in the couples storytelling and interactions with one another)? When we go into a show we often have a pre-conceived notion of what we are about to see based on the synopsis. How did the student’s perceptions change after seeing the show?

WRITE

Write a brief essay on how the First Métis Man of Odessa can help us empathize with refugees and immigrants fleeing war zones. Once finished, this can also be opened up to a group discussion.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[LESSON PLANS](#) Teaching Resources to Help Students Make Sense of the War in Ukraine

[TikTok Is Gripped by the Violence and Misinformation of Ukraine War](#)

[The Chinese-owned video app is dealing with a flood of war videos and the question of whether it is spreading unverified information.](#)