

## In Search of Cinderellas, in Naples and Beyond: Popular Culture Responses to Labor Migration from Ukraine<sup>[1]</sup>

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The question of Ukraine's relationship to Europe has commonly been addressed in Ukraine with the assertion that Ukrainians, above all, are Europeans, and that they equally share – and contribute to – the cultural and spiritual legacy of “European civilization.” This question routinely comes up in today's political debates on Ukraine's future membership in the EU, its regionalism and relationship with Russia. It also defines numerous intellectual discussions on Ukrainian identity often seen by popular cultural analysts as split between, or stretched along, the East/West, Russian/Ukrainian, and Soviet/national axes. The search for closer ties with Europe inspires new interpretations of Ukraine's history and its intellectual, spiritual and cultural traditions. Emphasizing past political ties with Europe is one avenue currently being explored to assert Ukraine's rootedness in the European cultural space. Revived regionalism, as in the example of Western Ukraine, helps to reassert local identities according to the region's past membership in European states. Andriy Zayarniuk has discussed the current widespread “Habsburg nostalgia” and the new discourse on “Galician/Habsburgian” identity in Western Ukraine as it has been unfolding in L'viv's public sphere, media, literature, and historical research (2001). Insisting on the long existing civilizational ties between Europe's West and East, where Ukraine is usually understood to be located, is another avenue. Another Ukrainian historian, Yaroslav Hrytsak, advocating a new definition of Eastern Europe as a “second-hand” Europe, reminds us that in historical terms Ukrainians have predominantly been consumers of European cultural values rather than their purveyors (2005). Despite the differences

in these approaches towards Ukraine/Europe (dis)engagements in the past, both analyses speak of contemporary Ukrainians' aspirations to remain in Europe's midst.

However, not only politicians and intellectuals have been contributing to the discussions on the relationship of Ukraine to Europe. Millions of *ordinary* Ukrainians have also begun to redefine their own relationship to Europe, often in truly existential quests for personal survival. The historical circumstances of the 1990s – the slow transition to a market economy, the stifling political climate and swift lumpenization of the population – created new socio-cultural parameters within which many Ukrainian nationals, continually experiencing economic difficulties in their homeland, turned in their search for income to the West, where unskilled labor has been in demand. Since then, migrational routes have taken them to every country on the European continent and beyond. As a result, a decade or so later, there is nowadays a whole new cohort of Ukrainians, who engage much more intimately with Europe than ever before. In their personal identity projects and their own search for Europeanness, they rely in the first instance on their own experiences.

Ukrainian politicians have been making dramatic claims about how many Ukrainians are working abroad. According to the official resolution adopted by the 14th All Ukrainian Congress of *Narodnyi Rukh* (the People's Movement) in March 2004, "every year, seven million Ukrainians depart from Ukraine in search of work abroad."<sup>[2]</sup> Other, more conservative estimates point to two to three million Ukrainian nationals abroad, with one million working in Russia, up to 300,000 in Poland, 200,000 in Italy and the Czech Republic, 115,000 in Portugal, 100,000 in Spain, 35,000 in Turkey, and 20,000 in the USA (Malynovska 2004: 14).<sup>[3]</sup>

Only a fraction of these migrants constitute the category of transnational nomads actively participating in the (popular) cultural, intellectual, economic, and financial global establishments. The names of figure-skating star Oksana Baiul, of soccer player Andrey Shevchenko, of numerous artists, professionals and scientists now living and working outside of Ukraine come to mind in this regard. Unlike these individuals, the overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian citizens currently residing abroad are labor migrants contributing, wittingly or unwittingly, to the most marginal economic niches in their host countries, such as domestic service, unskilled agricultural and industrial

work, and to the global shadow economies of the sex trade and human trafficking.

In addition, they contribute to European economies without severing ties with their families back home. On the contrary, migrants generally see their move to Europe as a means of improving the welfare of their families back home. According to the office of Ukraine's ombudswoman, they earn 400 million USD *monthly* and most of these moneys are transferred back to Ukraine.[4] Many observers claim that if it were not for the migrants' regular remittances, the local economies in Ukraine would long ago have collapsed.[5]

With such a pronounced Ukrainian presence in various corners of Europe, and with sustained and active transnational networks connecting Ukraine and Europe in the most intimate social spheres of family and personal life, the national project of Ukrainian identity as a modern European identity has been fully re-opened for negotiation, and this time not by intellectuals but by ordinary Ukrainian citizens.

One of the outcomes of these explorations of Europe is a chain of personal rediscoveries of Europe's 'otherness,' once publicly asserted by the Soviet propaganda and privately fantasized by Soviet citizens, including Ukrainians, and now experienced firsthand. Another outcome, which provides this article with its focus, is the emergence of a particular niche in contemporary Ukrainian popular culture, in which the phenomenon of labor migration is placed at the very core of the debate and Ukrainians' reflections on their engagement with Europe and their discoveries of its otherness are systematically registered, constructed, and reproduced. In this article based on my research on labor migration discourse in Ternopil region of Western Ukraine, I look at three public culture sites where the phenomenon of *zarobitchanstvo*, "a way of making a living outside of one's community while sustaining families staying behind," is dealt with. I examine the way *zarobitchanstvo* has been represented in a local newspaper, in three novels, and then, finally and more extensively, in an extremely popular theatrical production. Of particular interest to me is the question of how the idea of Europe and its cultural values is constructed in these public narratives.

Popular culture reflections on the phenomenon of *zarobitchanstvo* are on the rise in Ukraine, yet, to my knowledge, they have not triggered any sustained interest in Ukraine's established scholarly fields of history, literary or cultural studies. As under-researched as they are, the numerous reflections on labor migration in literature, theater, film and the media constitute a new public discursive space in Ukraine where

*zarobitchanstvo* is being constructed as a modern large-scale social drama of Ukrainian society unfolding in the imagined and lived shifting dualities of Europe's *here* and *there*. Ultimately, the goal of this article is to initiate a discussion on contemporary *zarobitchanstvo* discourse as it is evolving in Ukrainian public culture today.

Following in the steps of massive labor out-migration from Ukraine, labor migration discourse has been growing steadily. Its growth and expansion concern, first and foremost, the destiny of the migrants themselves and reflect the ambivalent and contradictory roles *zarobitchany*, or labor migrants, play today in their nation's political and economic life. On the one hand, one can identify political discourse which appropriates the figure of the migrant. To pursue their agendas, politicians of all camps in today's Ukraine represent labor migrants as the new agents of economic change (Keryk 2004). On the other hand, popular culture interpretations of labor migration explore the intimate side of this social phenomenon, examining ethical and moral dilemmas faced by migrants and scrutinizing migrant's uneasy choices. Writers and playwrights – the creators of fictive worlds and the purveyors of modern practices of imagination -- explore the many ethical dilemmas migrants face while away from home, family, and human relationships, challenged by distance and the otherness of their new social environs.

In the context of these explorations of migrant relationships, the relationship between Europe and Ukraine is re-coded over and over again in almost classical anthropological terms: dual juxtapositions of homeland to foreign land, known world to the world to be explored, our world to theirs, and a safe world to a dangerous one. In such popular culture narratives, Europe routinely emerges as an outside world, a place where dangerous liaisons develop and threaten to sever an individual from his/her family and homeland. In these explorations, the famous Slavic nostalgia for home – so well defined by Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* – is revived, explored and juxtaposed to the no less well-known Slavic/Soviet longing for the West. Here, the famous claim in a folk song from the turn of the twentieth century in response to another major Ukrainian population transfer to the Americas – the foreign land, the foreign land, not one family you ruined but many – is brought back to life in all its force.[\[6\]](#)

## NOVA TERNOPILS'KA HAZETA

Newspapers are especially to be credited for these representations. For example, *Nova Ternopils'ka Hazeta*, a regional weekly newspaper in Ternopil *oblast*, is one of many Ukrainian newspapers in which the labor migration phenomenon is routinely profiled. Ternopil *oblast*, one of Ukraine's western regions with the highest percentage of its population working abroad, was among the first regions of Ukraine to supply labor migrants to Europe. Currently Ternopil region citizens are employed in almost every corner of the European continent, and beyond, and their contribution to the regional economy is not insubstantial. In 2004, the Director of the Regional Office of Employment reported to the Ternopil Press Reform Club that labor migrants from the region annually remit 100 million USD (2002).<sup>[7]</sup>

Since its inception, *Nova* has regularly featured publications on labor migration, human trafficking and other related topics under a variety of headings, such as "Life Drama," "Confessions," "SOS," "Tragedy," and "Real Story." In September 2001, it introduced a new heading for such stories: "Zarobitky" (earnings outside home), which in January 2003 was changed into "Emigration." The latter finally acquired the status of a newspaper column and has been featured almost weekly ever since. This column profiles personal stories of labor migrants, including their personal correspondence. It publishes interviews with migrants themselves, features stories about human trafficking and the sex trade, and offers occasional legal advice on emigration and legalization abroad. Between August 2000 (the month the newspaper was launched) and August 2004, 183 issues were published. During the five months in 2000, five items concerning labor migration appeared in *Nova*. In 2001 it carried 15 articles on the topic, and in 2002 24. In 2003 it included 99 items on labor migration, and in the seven months of 2004, there were 31 articles. In many cases the same issue would contain between two and six often extended and lengthy pieces on the topic.

*Nova* has become the migrants' tribune. It regularly profiles personal stories told by the migrants themselves, either in the format of an interview or through the publication of personal letters. The paper does more than its share to routinely recreate an image of Europe as a strange, unwelcoming, and dangerous land, often in the sensationalist way characteristic of tabloid-writing. Half of the material published describes negative outcomes of laboring abroad, such as death, sexual exploitation, sickness, harassment, legal persecution in a host country,

and humiliation associated with the low status assigned to 'ours abroad.' The designations of 'slavery,' with respect to either sexual or domestic exploitation, and 'coffin return,' referring to deaths of migrants abroad whose bodies are regularly sent home, have grown to become popular metaphors due to their frequent usage in *Nova* between 2000 and 2004. Many publications praise the wit and inventiveness of 'ours abroad,' who, while illegally in the country of their destination, employ various tricks to better their situation. Stories of illegal border-crossings and fake identities are common, and they readily portray the protagonists behind these otherwise wrongful doings in quite a positive light, something they would not be if the same acts take place in Ukraine. However, in the context of migrants' explorations of Europe, different standards of ethics seem to apply, and the wrongdoers emerge almost as new folklore heroes, who out-trick the foreigners in the alien lands of Europe just as the old fairytale heroes out-tricked the antagonists they encountered in wild and dangerous forests on their way towards their fairytale goals. The material in newspapers like *Nova* is usually understood by local readers as being exactly the opposite of fairytales, though. As I was told by the librarians who helped me locate issues in a local public library in the summer of 2005, every story published is a true story: "we all read it, we know some of those people profiled. This is like a window to our own folks out there in Europe."

Interviews with migrants and migrants' letters presented in the media follow their own principles of composition, story organization, and plot development. While there is a certain element of drama to many of these letters, it is the literary/popular culture reflections on labor migration that replay to the fullest the range of homeland/other-land oppositions.

#### NOVELS

Popular culture proliferates with other examples of how the ambivalent relationship between Ukraine and Europe is reconstructed these days in terms of homeland/other-land, family love and stranger's love. In Ternopil region, three local writers have published novels dealing with labor migration: Mariana Yukhno's *Naiada* (2000), Orest Berezovskyj's *Internaimychka: dochka chy paserbnytsia Evropy?* (*A Hired Hand: The Daughter or Stepdaughter of Europe?*, 2004), and Lesia Romanchuk's *Dorohy Nazustrich* (*Four Roads Facing Each Other*, 2005).

One of the common threads that link these literary productions is their authors' unanimous attempt to question migrants' efforts to adopt European ways to their lifestyles. Consider, for example, Orest Berezovsky's *A Hired Hand: The Daughter or Stepdaughter of Europe?*. The novel explores failed family relations between an illegal female migrant in Italy, her husband and their two children, all of whom she has left behind. In it, Europe figures as a money-obsessed seductress that lures Ukrainian women away from their families. The story of a wife's long-term absence is pieced together through the chronologically arranged (fictive) letters the spouses exchange over the years. In these letters, the wife describes her newly adapted European ways, which she sees as liberating. She now believes that a married woman is entitled to many personal freedoms, including the right to live far away from her family, and scolds her husband for suspecting her of being unfaithful to him. The husband, unable to accept any of these developments, relates in his letters his frustration at his wife's engagement with Europe and lack of desire to come home:

Eagerly anticipating entering the wealthy foreign world flush with money, you ignored me to the point of not even taking my photo with you. [...] God forbid, I thought on my way home from the bus station, with my own photo still on me, realizing that I had been used by you in the past and would be a nuisance to you in the future. As Mariana [the daughter] later jealously confessed, also brainwashed by Europe's omnipresence, a European life is ahead of you is, if not a true one, then an almost true one. Perhaps later she will understand that for post-Soviet Europeans like us, [Europe] was and is only a castle in the air. (Berezovsky 2004: 75)

Although the novel's rhetoric reveals its author's rather traditional understanding of women's rights and roles in the family, it serves as a good example of a particular tendency in Ukraine's public culture to (a) construct the migrant as a betrayer of family, community, and homeland, (b) advocate for homeland loyalty and return, and (3) condemn the migrant's search for a kinship link with Europe.

The latter theme is similarly explored in Lesia Romanchuk's 2005 *Four Roads Facing Each Other*. The novel follows a female emigrant, a deliverer of cars, in her commutes between Germany, her German husband, and Ternopil, and explores her emotional oscillations between the "boring and wealthy" West, where her boring and wealthy Western husband is, and her hometown, where her most intimate personal dreams of home and love continue to be realized. Dedicating her book to the "people's" President Yushchenko, Romanchuk includes an appeal (to the President?) on the novel's front page, which again emphasizes both

the external and internal displacement of Ukrainians from their homeland: “return Ukraine to us, and return us to Ukraine” (Romanchuk 2005: 1).

Mariana Yukhno’s novel *Naiada* goes further in exploring Europe’s otherness and Europe as seductress. Her novel follows Lilia, a young Ukrainian student from Ternopil on her way to Italy, where she hopes to become a European model. Instead, she is sold to a local brothel and finds herself in a very different Europe than she imagined, in its underworld of sex slavery. Together with her heroine, the author questions the very decision to leave Ukraine (Yukhno 2000).

Literary responses to labor migration from Ukraine are growing, and not only in Western Ukraine.<sup>[8]</sup> Yet, within the existing limitations of the Ukrainian book redistribution system, it remains to be seen whom these publications will reach and how their readership will respond to the imagery of the migrant/Europe relationship.<sup>[9]</sup> Theater, on the other hand, with its ability to re-incarnate texts into three-dimensional live action, reaches out far more than individual novels. In Ternopil, as well as in many other locations throughout Western Ukraine, an opportunity to vicariously re-live the life of a labor migrant was provided by a Lviv-based theater company, which introduced the region to what proved to be an immensely popular play on the topic of labor migration.

#### THEATER: “NAPLES: CITY OF CINDERELLAS”

June 15, 2005, Lviv, Ukraine. On this lovely summer evening my friends and I venture out to see a play in the local drama theater. Working in Ternopil, I have long planned to see *Naples: City of Cinderellas* and asked my friends to purchase the tickets in advance. They assured me that there was no need to rush and that we would be able to walk in and buy tickets before the performance. These days in Ukraine, they reminded me, theater-going had long ceased to be the fashionable thing to do it was in the Soviet past when performances routinely played to full houses. “You will hardly get a third of an audience,” Marta told me. “We don’t need to worry about tickets.” So I gave in. And here we are, on the eve of the performance, ticketless yet hopeful, strolling down Lviv’s old cobblestone streets towards Zan’kovetska Theater. Long before we spot the theater on the corner of the street, we find ourselves swamped by many other hopefuls scrounging for spare tickets. Minutes later, in front of the theater, I find myself in the midst of the large crowd of theatergoers, many of whom continue to ask us for tickets. Is it the play’s popularity or the urbanites’ love for theater, I ask myself, still hoping to figure



out how to get us inside. My first assumption unfortunately turned out to be right (*field notes*).

Launched in 2003 by Zan'kovetska Ukrainian Drama Theater in Lviv, *Naples: City of Cinderellas* became a major and lasting theatrical sensation in Western Ukraine. Since its early days the play has won the hearts of many viewers and has been taken on tour to many Ukrainian cities, including Ternopil, and even re-staged in some by local theater companies. Viewers' overwhelmingly positive response to the play's social commentary has insured the play's growing popularity, to the point that it has become a *social* phenomenon of its own kind. The play has regularly sold out everywhere it has been performed in Ukraine over the last three years, and in the spring of 2005, it traveled to the US and Canada, with twelve shows staged in the largest cities across North America.

Back in June 2005, the play, which in the end I managed to attend, surpassed my expectations. To some the production may have come across as too grotesque and perhaps even as mediocre in its effort to deal with the complex nature of human choice under the social pressures of immigration. It may be argued that not much effort was made on behalf of either the playwright or the director to portray the play's characters as real human beings. Rather, one could claim, resembling many Soviet theatrical productions of the 1970s in the style of socialist realism - with its tendency to overemphasize the characters' social roles and collective responsibility - the play presented its audience with another set of (post-socialist) generalizations and stereotypes. I will soon return to the question of the play's artistic qualities and the reasons behind the choice of this particular artistic language.

Despite its presumed shortcomings, the play provided me, and the rest of the audience, with a most unique theatrical experience by immersing us in 'ritual time and reality,' in which the audience and the play's protagonists were brought together as if at a family reunion after a long forced separation. This atmosphere of reunion, one may assume, was re-created over and over again during the play's 200 performances (as of June 2005) in the various cities of Ukraine and beyond.

Let me present a short summary. *Naples: City of Cinderellas*, a tragicomic exploration of human character and loyalty - to one's homeland, to one's kin, and to one's moral principles - questions how far both can be stretched under extraordinary circumstances. The plot follows two Western Ukrainian women (one from Lviv, another from a nearby village) in a journey from their homes to an upper middle-class

household in Italy. In this Italian household, the two find work as domestic servants after a year of uncertain, semi-hungry, and illegal existence abroad. Maria, an educated urbanite and a dreamer with an art history diploma, is full of lofty ideals acquired from the noble books she must have read in the past. Her character is reminiscent of the politically correct literary protagonists of socialist realism, and her life path typical of the Soviet intelligentsia, whose government salaries, never high, simply collapsed together with the Soviet system in the early 1990s. In Ukraine, Maria has left behind an elderly mother, a young son, and a husband whose business failed, resulting in the loss of their house. In the midst of this post-Soviet economic chaos, Maria was presented with little choice but to go abroad, to Italy, to support her family and earn the money needed to buy their house back.

Her cousin Halia is a single gal from the countryside in her mid-thirties, a hardworking and down-to-earth eternal optimist who follows her own calling. Halia has come to Italy in search of a new life away from the potato fields and never-ending menial work in the post-*kolhosp* countryside. In contrast to Maria's, the viewer receives hints that Halia's ideas about how to get closer to her dreams include a number of unethical steps, which in the end provide both women with work and some element of security while abroad.

Since every household in Western Ukraine knows someone or has its own family member working (illegally) abroad, it is not surprising that a play that speaks so authoritatively about the lives of Ukrainian migrant women abroad has been very popular with Ukrainians.



In the theater, next to me, sits an older woman. She tells me that this is the third time she has come to see the play. Both her daughters are in Italy, and she has not seen them for about two and a half years. During the intermissions, my neighbor waves and chats to many people in the theater. They all seem to be related to each other somehow, perhaps through this virtual reunion with their beloved daughters, sisters, mothers, who are, like the play's heroines, currently working as maids in European households? (*field notes*)

And so the performance continues, with its comical and acerbic representations of *us* and *them*, of *homeland* and *strange-land*, of *our* virtues and *their* immoralities, of *our* pro-active search for real love and real life and *their* presumed superficial existence, intellectual inertia, and fake feelings.

The theme of Europe as 'immoral seductress' runs through the whole play, patching together its many subplots of various, and numerous, accounts of illegitimate love affairs the members of the Italian household have been involved in. These affairs compensate for what is an assumed absence of true feelings in their existing legitimate relationships. The audience is also exposed to a series of dramatic public confessions of love and betrayal professed by the actors, often in such moments directly addressing the audience. What are these liaisons? The mistress of the household, tired of being married to her husband of eighteen years whom she never loved in the first place, is pursued by an old lover from

her pre-marital past. Her drunkard husband plays his own game, cornering and harassing every maid who comes to work in his villa, including Maria, the main protagonist of the play. Yet, he eventually ends up in the hands of smart gal Halia, who has been casting her net in hopes of this outcome from the very beginning of the play. The wealthy fiancée of the couple's son Roberto is immersed in affairs behind Roberto's back. With these developments in the background, Roberto, while still engaged to Lola, falls in love with Maria.

Counter to all these chaotic 'Italian' pursuits, Maria advances a different take on love and affairs. She does not give in to the numerous temptations around her. The embodiment of the good Ukrainian woman, she cannot betray herself, her family, and her people, including those in the audience, who need reaffirmation that their beloved daughters or sisters or mothers abroad have not lost their hearts, morals, and dignity in the talons of Europe. The viewers eventually learn that Maria's husband has been living with another woman since Maria's departure. This, in the end, justifies Roberto's advances and Maria's conceived attraction for a fellow artistic soul. Only at the end of the play does Maria learn, and together with her so the audience, that back home, her eight year-old son has been living on the streets, abandoned by his father and stepmother, and that her elderly mother has passed away. These kinds of life-changing events are usually important points of departure for a playwright in the development of her play's characters. In the case of the *Cinderellas*, however, they are brushed off, introduced as minor details at the very end of the play, only to help bring the play to its happy end and to resolve the numerous Italian love triangles in which the Ukrainian women have become entangled.

When it comes to human relationships, the play, in its effort to philosophize about the choices of the Ukrainian labor migrant women abroad, continuously oscillates between two kinds of ethics: the ethics of illegitimate affairs, Italian-style, and the ethics of true love, Ukrainian-style. To give playwright Nadia Kovalyk credit, she does not present a clear-cut distinction between the two kinds of ethics. The audience is presented with the two paths the Ukrainian women may follow while abroad. Some, like Maria, manage to withstand the seduction of Europe and remain loyal to their homelands, family, and principles of love, even if back home they are betrayed by their own husbands. Others embrace the temptations of Europe for their own reasons, like Halia who is conveniently presented in this play as a single woman whose hopes of attracting an Italian lover are thus justified by the absence of a Ukrainian

partner back home. Yet, in the end, it is not a play about the two or more choices Ukrainian women have in their pursuit of happiness. Rather it is the play about *us* and 'our' ethics in juxtaposition to *them* and 'theirs.' It is the immorality of 'others,' the Europeans, comically placed in the foreground of this play, which threatens the assumed virtues of a Ukrainian female migrant, while 'our' immoralities, such as the immorality of Ukrainian husbands, are only briefly referred to at the very end of the play and only presented as another external challenge to women's dignity.

Back in June 2005, it seemed to me that this message fell on the right ears. The audience, representing those left behind in Ukraine, warmly welcomed the reassurances that their daughters were remaining strong while under Europe's spell. Fedir Stryhun, Zankovetska Theater's artistic director and the director of the production, pointed out to me in an interview that while there are two Ukrainian female characters in the play, it is Maria who is conceived of as the collective image representing the "good part of the Ukrainian womanhood in emigration" (Stryhun 2005). As a result, Maria's interaction with the Italians is by default set up to represent the relationship between two worlds: the Ukrainian and the European. In this regard such lines of interaction as Maria/Signora, Maria/Signor, Maria/Lola, and Maria/Roberto are illustrative of how these dualities are acted out in the play.

*MARIA and SIGNORA:* By the very nature of her work in Italy/Europe, Maria is a servant; she is there to serve others. But Maria is also a proud Ukrainian who tries to educate others about the greatness of her nation and her culture. It is not surprising that the playwright opens the interaction between *us* and *them* through Maria's conversations with her Signora Lucia, the mistress of the house, in which the Ukrainian maid while dusting shelves tries to convey to her disinterested mistress the greatest achievements of Ukrainian culture. As if in defense of her own life choices to become an illegal migrant, Maria attempts to explain her personal predicament through the dilemmas of her nation. The solemnity of her pontifications as well as her high sense of dignity are conveyed through Maria's body. Motionless, she stands still, her chin up, and her eyes staring into the darkness of the theater, with a dust rag in her hands, while her employers are usually hovering over her in a most animated way, throwing things around or at her, fighting in front of her or yelling at her.



Maria's reserved manner is in great contrast with the noisy and incoherent movements of the Italians, generating an impression of them as unsettled, unstable, naive, and childish people. The play's genre easily accommodates this, for it is, after all, a comedy, and in comedies, the characters need not be explored in depth and often come across as one-sided. Such are the norms of the genre. Signora Lucia, for example, continuously questions the need for intellectual pursuits when it comes to a woman's virtues. She does not believe Maria's assertions that Ukraine is a modern country, yet when she falls sick, she prefers to take Ukrainian pills from Maria, rather than Italian ones. She makes fun of Maria's habit of reading, yet learns a great deal from her and occasionally inserts tidbits of newly acquired trivia in conversations with others.

For a Ukrainian audience, the Signora comes across as unsophisticated and lacking the most basic knowledge, for she cannot distinguish, for example, between Andrey and Taras Shevchenko. For the playwright, as well as for ordinary Ukrainians, it would seem that it is hard to imagine that Taras Shevchenko, the most celebrated poet in Ukraine, may not be known outside of their own country. Not having the basic common knowledge expected of every member of society – here not knowing Taras Shevchenko -- is the equivalent of not being a fully normal human being. The Signora's body language suggests a further reduction in her humanity. When she acts, she meows and screams, cries

and laughs, or engages in uncoordinated dance-like movements, with extreme hand gestures. Also, she never converses. All these movements are acted out in contrast to Maria's highly dignified motionless posture.

*MARIA and SIGNOR*: The uneven relationship between Maria and Signor Nicolo is even more graphic than that between Maria and his wife. To the Signor, Maria is merely another sexual object. Throughout the play, all we learn about this Italian man is that he is a drunkard who has not made love to his wife for 18 years and who regularly sexually assaults the maids in his house. When Maria rejects his advances, he flies into a fury. Overall he is portrayed as a savage male hunter incapable of decent behavior.

However, the play does not suggest that all Italian men are a version of Signor Nicolo, for his son Roberto is the opposite. Still, the character of Signor Nicolo provides the director with the opportunity to remind the audience of the dangers Ukrainian women immigrants face while in Europe. In the context of the play, and in Europe by default, Maria and Halia are first of all seen as objects of pursuit and not as the agents of their own lives. And while Halia is quite in agreement with the division of the world into clearly cut male /female domains, and while she plays "the hunter/prey" game well, Maria does not accept that such a role is the only one possible for a female migrant.

*MARIA and LOLA*: Roberto's fiancée Lola also sees Maria as a sexual object, and a competitor, allowing the viewer to assume that she sees herself also only as an embodiment of the particular gender role ascribed to her by society. Despite the fact that she is not in love with Roberto, Lola is jealous of Maria, for Roberto prefers this Ukrainian woman to her. In Kovalyk's script, Lola is created to look like a doll; "with blond hair, like a Barbie doll, Lola enters, she is very extravagant and confident of herself" (Kovalyk, n.d.). Lola is thus portrayed as the opposite of Maria, and the actresses act this opposition out in a most vivid, if not animalistic, way. As in the case with Signora Lucia, Lola's movements in Maria's proximity are reminiscent of a cunning, dangerous vixen defending her prey, Roberto. For Lola, Maria is a nuisance; she is not even sure why she has to talk to this foreigner from a bizarre place she mockingly calls 'Honolulu.' She yells and hisses at Maria, throws Roberto's drawings of Maria at her and repeatedly re-asserts her (European) superiority. She demands that Maria go back where she came from, and leave Roberto alone, and she is even prepared to pay her a few thousand dollars to do so.

*MARIA and ROBERTO*: When Roberto comes into the picture, the audience can finally glimpse some light at the end of the dark tunnel of Maria's life in Italy. Roberto, who has just witnessed his fiancée's sexual stint with another man, is attracted to Maria's solidness and pure soul. He tells her that he would marry her, if only she were not already married. Yet, Maria, still loyal to her husband, rejects Roberto's advances. For the finale, Maria learns the news of her husband and son, and Roberto packs a suitcase to accompany her on her trip back to Ukraine. The audience is invited to contemplate the future happy life of the two in Maria's homeland. Interestingly, while the negative Italian characters stay behind in their own 'corrupt' world, Roberto's only choice in his pursuit of happiness is to leave this world altogether and to redeem himself on the other side of the East/West divide, in Ukraine, with the epitome of the best Ukrainian womanhood has to offer.

How, then, is the dichotomy of *us* and *them*, Ukrainians and Europeans (Italians), played out in the play? To a Ukrainian audience, the comedy successfully advances the idea that Ukrainians cannot just compete but win in the game of East-West power relations. It is either virtue (in Maria's case) that preserves character or wit (as in Halia's) that allows them to outdo others. Both are juxtaposed to the projected dullness and pretense of the Italian lifestyle. On the one hand, we are presented with comic and caricature-like Italians, almost deprived of humane qualities, ultimately suggesting to the viewer that when it comes to the quality of their social relations, the Italians' world is unlivable. There is no space for Maria, a good daughter of her nation, in this alien land. All four Italians in the play at some point want to throw her out of their house, out of their lives, and out of Italy; all try to convince her to return to her homeland. Seeing Maria as a threat to her son's marriage to the wealthy Lola, the Signora stages a theft and publicly accuses Maria of committing it. Lola openly tries to bribe Maria to leave Roberto and Italy. Signor Nicolo wants to fire her for rejecting his advances. Even Roberto, head-over-heels in love with Maria, urges her to go back to Ukraine because only in Ukraine, he keeps telling her, will she be able to find true happiness.

Why is there such one-sidedness in the representation of the play's characters, also noticed by other commentators (Bovkun 2003)? Opting for a black-and-white approach to character depiction should not be surprising to an attentive viewer. Besides the already noted fact that the play was written in the popular genre of tragicomedy and therefore tends towards a grotesque and oversimplifying treatment of characters,



this approach is also needed as the play was written in the first place for local audiences caught up *en masse* in the predicaments and complexities of the post-socialist transition. As such, the play serves a particular ideological purpose, providing contemporary Ukrainians with an authoritative justification of their complex life choices given the range of socioeconomic pressures they have had to face. It effectively creates an important ritual space, a reality, in which the negotiations of Ukrainians' place in Europe and the assertion of their own European-ness can be successful. As the theater director related to me, Ukrainian audiences have received this play so well because it allows them to see *themselves*, and also Ukrainians abroad, in a winning position vis-à-vis Europe. Yet, as in any other ritual space, the worlds recreated in the play, both the world of 'ours' and the world of 'theirs' are both conceived in local terms.

*Cinderellas* is a good illustration of how local literary/popular culture responds to the global experiences of displacement, alienation, and imaginings of Europe as a 'strange' space are realized as local cultural projects. The imagery advanced in the play – of both contemporary Ukrainian Cinderellas and their Italian masters – is invested in the local cultural scene and relies heavily on a vast repertoire of post-socialist pop culture and folklore narratives, jokes, and references. Portraying Italian characters as arrogant, immoral, and/or naive is necessarily a product of the local Ukrainian imagination. Their actions, body language, smiles, and frowns are strangely Ukrainian. Consider Lola, for example. It is a Ukrainian playwright who has put the word 'Honolulu' in the mouth of this Italian woman when she speaks derogatively of Ukraine. In the Ukrainian context, the sound of the word 'Honolulu' is intuitively associated with a variety of negative or comic images or feelings, and the name is meant here to sound very distant, foreign and derogative. The Ukrainian audience certainly laughed at Lola saying it. To a Western ear, familiar with the promoted attractiveness and exoticism of Hawaiian resorts, could the name Honolulu serve the same purpose? To further undermine Maria's status, Lola occasionally refers to Maria as "Isaura." Iscrava Isaura is a character in a Brazilian soap opera from the 1970s, a white slave girl, who serves in the household of a wealthy Brazilian family. This soap opera version of the Cinderella story was shown in the former Soviet Union in 1988-89 and was immensely popular in Ukraine, stirring up much emotional public response. "Rabynia Isaura" (the slave Isaura) entered public folklore as a particular archetype of the late Soviet period,

surfacing in many jokes and anecdotes. A “real” Italian woman would hardly be a part of a socio-cultural context in which references to Isaura circulated.

From the moment of its inception, *Naples: City of Cinderellas* was hardly destined to be simply another regular theatrical production and, indeed, with its growing popularity, it has become very much a public project commemorating national loss and suffering, called on to justify the individual choices in favor of migration made by millions of Ukrainians even if these choices bring about the collapse of their nuclear families, deterioration of parental care, and separation from their children. Projects of this kind do not afford traditional metaphoric ambiguity or the complexity of artistic representations. To successfully communicate its message, the play had to rely on distinctive shades of black and white. Presenting, among other things, Europe’s strangeness and ‘otherness’ in local terms and contrasting these with the familiarity of the local world provides its Ukrainian audiences with powerful tools to interpret the drama unfolding in front of them – in the theater, in their families and in the nation – in their own terms.

That is why it was an almost impossible task to translate these local projects of Europe imaginings and to place them in a different cultural context, as was the case when the Zankovets’ka Theater production of *Cinderellas* came to North American cities in the spring of 2005. One of the viewers, a Ukrainian–American from Chicago, later related, “Maybe I’m just too self-righteous and American to have appreciated the thing, but it left me (to be really truthful) [...] well [...] pissed off.” She then continued to explain it as “one big extra-marital fiesta,” disagreeing especially with the depiction of Western/Italian characters:

Besides, the fiancée was a real bitch. We know this because she wears tight Lycra dresses and smokes her cigarettes through a 12” holder. Never mind that no one’s ever seen an Italian woman who actually looks like this. She’s in the play, so it *must* be true. She has the terrible misfortune of being wealthy and Western. This, according to the playwright, makes her incapable of any real emotion. Pain and sorrow and heartbreak are exclusive to our poor Ukrainian heroines.<sup>[10]</sup>

This self-declared “angry and self-righteous” American proceeded to conclude that:

When all was said and done, the biggest shock wasn’t the play itself, but the realization that I was the only person in the audience who felt angry and offended. The rest of the crowd – nearly all 4th-wave Ukrainians – clapped till their hands were sore while I searched in vain around the room for other signs of frosty American indignation. I’d really hoped that a story like this could have

given me something with which to start bridging the distance between Them and Me - a fresh insight and maybe some small plot of common ground. I'm saddened by the feeling that the gap has only been made wider. Then again, maybe I'm just finally realizing how wide it's always been.[\[11\]](#)

Interestingly, this American viewer's emotional response to the metaphorical line drawn in the play between Ukrainians and Europeans/ Westerners is expressed in terms of the juxtaposition of "Them" and "Me" (and other Americans). She felt like a complete outsider among the recent Ukrainian immigrants to the US, who constituted the audience for the play in all the American and Canadian cities it played in and who could easily navigate the play's vocabulary of images, stereotypes, jokes, and references.

The dilemmas faced by the three million plus Ukrainians currently working abroad and their families left behind are multiple. For many of these individuals, consciously searching for a European identity may not be on their list of priorities, since in the majority of cases they need to be concerned above all about economic support and sustaining their cash-poor families either left behind or already in Europe. Yet, how Ukrainians approach their own new role of migrant laborers in the countries of the European Union (and beyond), and how their compatriots back home reflect upon this direct engagement with the "real" Europe is illustrative of how ambivalent Ukrainians' imaginations of, and relationship with, Europe remains. Over the last decade, Ukrainian popular culture responses to the phenomenon of labor migration have developed a whole stock of reflections on Ukrainians' engagement with Europe and on their imaginings of Europe as a 'strange' space. Given the already quite lengthy history (of at least fifteen years) of this engagement and given the ever growing exposure of Ukrainians to "things European," one might expect that Ukrainians' representations and narratives of rendezvousing with Europe will continue to borrow equally from both the Ukrainian and the European contexts. Yet, apparently the popular culture imaginings of Europe (and of Europeans) that resonate the most with the Ukrainian public are those constructed in local terms and remain local cultural artifacts best appreciated in situ. On the one hand, these representations concern global socio-economic phenomena, such as the increasing international interaction in the context of the ongoing globalization of the economy. On the other hand, they are vivid examples of how global phenomena informed by uneven hierarchies of global economic power and political control are received and accounted for in local contexts. In addition,

despite its direct participation in various global cultural flows, post-Soviet (Western) Ukrainian culture continues to draw on imaginative patterns developed and practiced under the tenets of a different, earlier ideology, namely, the Soviet one. As a result, someone unfamiliar with this earlier cultural context would understandably find it difficult to relate to the narrative, imagery, and message of this play. The case of the *Cinderellas* is a vivid example of such difficulty. Nevertheless, as long as these representations continue to serve their social purpose – explaining the predicament of labor migration to Ukrainians and justifying its many social outcomes – they will persevere.

## NOTES

- [1] An earlier version of this paper was prepared for the workshop on “Sustaining Studies of Central European Cultural Diversity, organized by the Canadian Centre for German and European Studies, York University, Toronto, October 28-29, 2005. I would like to thank the organizers, Susan Ingram and Markus Reisenleitner, for inviting me to be part of this intellectually stimulating meeting of scholars.
- [2] “On economic policy of a current government and its outcomes -- poverty, unemployment and destitution of the Ukrainian nation.” March 24, 2004. <http://www.nru.org.ua/about/documents/?id=33>
- [3] For a nation of forty seven million, these absences account for four to six percent of Ukraine’s population.
- [4] cited from [http://freengop.com/slowo/puls\\_ukrajny/ukr\\_tudovi\\_mihrany.htm](http://freengop.com/slowo/puls_ukrajny/ukr_tudovi_mihrany.htm). Similar data has been routinely reported from the office of the Ombudswoman of Ukraine, Nina Karpachova.
- [5] <http://www.ria.ua/view.php?id=3316>
- [6] The folk song circulated orally in many versions. Jars Rudnycky’s collections, for example, recite its versions recorded in Canada (1956).
- [7] [http://ternopil.cure.org.ua/dbm.php/archive/2004-09-07\\_78](http://ternopil.cure.org.ua/dbm.php/archive/2004-09-07_78)
- [8] Other recent literary publications touching upon the theme of labor migration in one way or another that were available in Ternopil bookstores in 2004/2005 included Irena Karpa’s *Froyd by plakav (Freud Would Have Cried)* (2005), Irena Rozdobud’ko’s *Rankovyj Prybyral’nyk (The Morning Cleaner)* (2004), and Yevhen Demchenko’s *Hospodari Bohemii (The Masters of Bohemia)* (2003).
- [9] One should not forget that the new technologies of communication confine much of such response to the private sphere of individual families, since mobile phones and the internet provide families with direct and near immediate access to personalized stories of Europe as shared by those working abroad.
- [10] Anonymous. “Neapol - Misto Popeliushok and the Angry Self-Righteous American, May 2, '05 3:33 PM ET, for everyone,” <http://kholian.multiply.com/journal/item/8>, retrieved Sept 22, 2005.
- [11] Ibid.

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