

Lev Dodin

## Open Letter

Lev Dodin's open letter, published in the Moscow journal *Teatr* on 28 February 2022, is not solely addressed to Vladimir Putin, but to all who are responsible for starting the war in Ukraine.

Lev Dodin is the artistic director of the Maly Drama Theatre-Theatre of Europe in St Petersburg. His 1985 *Brothers and Sisters*, devised from a novel by Fyodor Abramov set in the far north of the Soviet Union shortly after the Second World War, won the director and his actors world acclaim. International access to this production came from the company's various tours during the early and mid-1990s. Themes of war returned in Dodin's 2007 *Life and Fate*, devised from the eponymous novel by Vasily Grossman, war correspondent at Stalingrad. This production was reviewed and discussed widely, wherever it was performed, and also by Maria Shevtsova in NTQ 95 (August 2008) and NTQ 98 (May 2009).

TO SAY that I am 'shaken' would say nothing. I am a child of the Second World War, and it is impossible for me to imagine, even in a fearful nightmare, Russian missiles aimed at Ukrainian cities and villages, driving Kyiv's citizens into bomb shelters or forcing them to flee their country. When we were children, we played at defending Moscow, Stalingrad, Leningrad, and Kyiv. It is impossible even to realize that today Kyiv is defending itself or surrendering to Russian soldiers and officers. My brain is sticking to my skull and refuses to see, hear, or paint such scenes.

The last two years of the pandemic scourge should have reminded us, living on all sides of all possible borders, how fragile and vulnerable human life is, and how, in one single minute, it collapses when we lose people we love. But they have not. In these days, the world of people whose nearest and dearest die falls apart, as does the world of those who kill somebody's nearest.

Mercy, compassion, and empathy do not yield to the will of states and politicians. It is impossible to dictate to people when and whom they should fear, when and for whom they should feel pity. The mission of art and culture has always been and still is – especially after all the horrors of the twentieth century – to teach people to perceive other people's pain as their own, to understand that no single idea, not the greatest or most wonderful idea, is worth a human life. Now it can be said: once again, art and culture have not managed to accomplish this mission.

I am seventy-seven years old, and it is not difficult for me to imagine what will happen next, everywhere: a division between those who are right and wrong; a search for enemies within; a search for external enemies; attempts to remodel the past; come to terms with the present; rewrite the future. All this has already happened in the twentieth century.

During these days, we have arrived in the future. It is in these very days that the twenty-first century began. All of us together have allowed this century to come in. To dawn exactly as it has dawned. The dawning twenty-first century has turned out to be more terrifying than the twentieth. What

is left for us to do? Pray, repent, hope, implore, demand, protest? Probably everything that we have not done until now: love another, forgive another as we forgive ourselves, not believe in Evil, and not take Evil for Good.

I am seventy-seven years old and have lost many people whom I loved during the course of my life. Today, when missiles of hatred and death fly over our heads instead of doves of peace, I can only say one thing: Stop! The human organism cannot be healed by surgical operations. The flow of the patient's blood infects the one operating with an incurable sepsis. Stop surgical intervention. Tie tourniquets

on wounds. Let us achieve the impossible: let us make the twenty-first century as we have dreamt it would be and not as we have made it. I am doing the only thing that I can: I beg you to stop!

Stop.

I am begging you!

### **Editorial Note**

Translated from the original Russian by Maria Shevtsova, author of *Dodin and the Maly Drama Theatre: Process to Performance* (Routledge, 2004) and editor of *New Theatre Quarterly*.