

‘It changed my whole life’: Ukrainian refugee, ASU theater MFA student shares stories of loss, hope

By Lacy Chaffee, ASU News
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Editor’s note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

An MFA student graduating from Arizona State University's [theater for youth and community program](#) in the [School of Music, Dance and Theatre](#), Anastasia Levkun has taken the meaning of “community theater” to heart. =

Levkun has built an impressive area of artistic specialization: theater created with and for immigrant and refugee communities. Her applied project, [“While We Wait,”](#) is an original play that explores the experiences of Ukrainian refugees.

“Since 2022, when a full-scale invasion happened in Ukraine, I’ve watched how war changes time,” said Levkun. “It turns days into waiting rooms — waiting for news, waiting for safety, waiting for life to ‘return to normal.’ But as the war continues with no clear end, waiting stops being a temporary state and becomes a way of living. I keep returning to one question: How do we keep living fully without putting life on pause?”

Levkun is from Zolochiv, a small town in west Ukraine. When the war broke out, she was living in Kyiv. She moved to Poland and then to Germany for a job in Berlin, slowly trying to rebuild her life in another country. She spent five years applying to university programs and seeking other opportunities before she was accepted to the School of Music, Dance and Theatre at Arizona State University.

She said she wouldn’t have been able to come without significant financial support.

“When you’re a refugee, you don’t think about doing what you love,” said Levkun. “You think about just trying to survive.”

To help her get to Arizona, she received an [EducationUSA Opportunity Funds](#) scholarship that helped pay for her visa and flight to the United States. She also received a [Bridge4Students](#) scholarship, designed to support international students experiencing an emergency caused by war, which helped pay for books and other living expenses.

At ASU, Levkun received a half-tuition scholarship as well as a teaching assistantship for all three years. She received several other awards to support her education and to fund her applied project, including the J. Orin Edson Entrepreneurship + Innovation Institute Creative Spark Award, Arizona Commission on the Arts Artist Opportunity Grant, Lin Wright Award in Theatre for Youth, Special Talent Award – Theatre, Creative Constellation and Design and Arts Corps Grant, Gaga Online Scholarship, ASU Graduate Student Government Travel Award/Career Development Grant, Lui & Wan Foundation/Teachers Development Program Fellowship and a University Graduate Fellowship.

“It meant everything for me,” she said. “I didn’t have time to work enough to collect money. It opened up doors that I could never have entered if not for them. It changed my whole life, basically.”

Levkun crafted her applied project, “While We Wait,” around short scenes showing the experiences of a father, mother and daughter during war. In between the scenes are verbatim stories of people that Levkun interviewed — people in Kyiv, in Arizona and in a city close to Russia. The play talks about home, what it means to stay, what it means to leave and the pain of loss. Levkun ends the devised work with a chapter on hope and dreams, because that’s how she chooses to live.

“A lot of people from the audience said they resonated with people in the show; they understood in the same way what home means to them,” Levkun said. “We’re all human beings. We all lose something. We all wait for something and dream about things.”

Levkun continues to be hopeful about the future.

“It’s not about being smart or being lucky, it’s about being persistent and trying and believing,” she said. “If I can get into ASU from a small town in the middle of nowhere, anything is possible. Sometimes it just takes more time than we want.”

Below, Levkun shares more about her time at ASU and the lessons she’s learned across life and her field of study.

Question: What was your “aha” moment when you realized you wanted to study theater?

Answer: In Ukraine, you graduate high school when you’re 16. It’s very early to know what you want to do with your life. I really wanted to be an actress, but I’m from a small town and my parents are not connected to art in any way. For them, it was something crazy. It was a dream I had to put aside because it wasn’t the right time. When I got accepted to my university in Kyiv, I was accepted into the computer science program.

When I saw all these opportunities (at university) compared to my small town, I wanted to study theater. But it wasn’t like at ASU, where you can try different opportunities. I didn’t get accepted, and then I tried again and again. It’s very competitive. I couldn’t get accepted, but I started going to different theater acting classes and an actor’s lab. I studied there for three years; it was a great experience. We performed in English. That’s when my dream of studying theater in the United

States began. I was so into acting that I couldn't stop. I couldn't do computer science after that.

Q: What is something that surprised you during your time at ASU?

A: Everyone who graduates from our program is doing different things. It didn't feel competitive. Everyone has such unique paths, and every professor helps with each of those paths. Sometimes you need an outside eye to see what you're good at and what you're passionate about. That was something very special about this program. They really see what you're interested in and your strengths. They don't limit it. A lot of my work is not done specifically with youth, but they never limited me to that. They told me, "If you want to work with adults, do it!"

Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at ASU?

A: [Mary McAvoy](#) was my program advisor and committee chair. There was a moment while talking about my applied project when I wasn't sure whether to make a performance or to do a professional development workshop for Ukrainian educators. She said, "We see you more as an artist," and she helped me find that path.

[Amanda Pintore](#) is a great professor that helped me and led me through those moments when I wasn't sure I could do it. She didn't limit me and opened me up to different ideas.

[Rachel Bowditch](#) was also on my committee. I took many of her devising classes. My applied project became a devised work with actors and how this collaborative process is made. She gave me a lot of guidance and knowledge. I love how many crazy ideas she has and how she puts them into life. I'm not a traditional theater person, and she's that way too. Seeing how she does that really inspired me.

[Idris Goodwin](#) really helped me with the [New Work Lab](#) and also supported me throughout this whole crazy semester. When I wasn't sure, he would tell me, "You're a graduate student, you should ask for it!"

[Kristin Hunt](#) just basically helps everyone because she's just the go-to person. I emailed her so many times! She allowed me to do so many things, projects and everything because she said yes.

Q: What are your plans after graduation?

A: It's very open for now. With the play, I want to keep working on it ... giving it to other people to produce and perform it. I definitely feel like it's just the starting point. It's my first experience of writing, directing and acting. It was so very personal to me. I wanted to be a part of it as much as possible. I want more time and resources so that it can get even bigger or to start touring it. There are lots of ways to present it; I'm totally open to bringing it to the world.

I'm applying now for assistant professor positions; I haven't been successful yet. It's been a rough year to find a job. Right now, I want to teach and create. I enjoy teaching; I also love making and creating art. It's my goal to find that balance.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Anastasia Levkun, an MFA student in ASU's theater for youth and community program, performing a scene from her applied project "While We Wait," an original play that explores the experiences of Ukrainian refugees. Photo by Abigail Wilt

Gallery



A scene from "While We Wait."



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