

Fig. 1: Vladyslava Bondar.
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Kupala Brighton: Exploring a Ukrainian Midsummer Festival in an English City

Marek Kohn and Vladyslava Bondar

‘**F**rom my childhood I remember the three most important events of the year,’ says Lesia Kyrylenko, who grew up in central Ukraine: ‘Christmas in the winter, Easter in spring, and Ivana Kupala in the summer.’¹ Now held in a Brighton park, the midsummer Kupala festival has become one of the most important events in the calendar of the new Ukrainian community that formed in Sussex after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Warmly embraced and creatively reworked, Kupala’s traditions are a powerful resource for sustaining the community and enabling it to tell its stories.

Kupala is part of a midsummer festival tradition that manifests in similar forms all across Europe, and over a period of time that pre-dates the full ascendancy of Christianity. People light bonfires on the longest day at gatherings from Portugal and Ireland to Estonia and Greece. In the fourth century CE, according to the martyr St Vincent, pagans in southwestern France would set light to a wheel and roll it down a hill to a river.² In 21st-century Ukraine, Lesia Kyrylenko and her neighbours would set car tyres on fire and send them tumbling down a hill, ‘like a symbol of the sun’.

Bonfires and burning wheels are not a feature of Kupala in Brighton, where the celebrations have to comply with park rules and municipal safety regulations. Nor is there any open water, apart from a small ornamental pond. But even though the two fundamental symbolic elements of fire and water are unavailable, the site has become part of the festival’s character. There are hints of the home landscape. Preston Park is on a hillside, crowned by a fringe of woodland that serves to evoke Kupala’s natural habitat in the Ukrainian countryside – and at the base of the valley, underneath the London road, there is a ‘lost’ subterranean river. But the site’s greatest emotional significance is that the first Kupala celebration there, in July 2022, was also the first major occasion at which Ukrainians who had reached Sussex in the preceding months came together as a new community.

Figs 2 and 3: (top and bottom left) Kupala in Preston Park, Brighton, July 2023.
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Fig. 3: Mara, goddess of death, played by Valerie Zabashta, and Mavka, the forest spirit, played by Bohdana Storozuk.
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Fig. 4: Kira Makogon, Chair of the Stand for Ukraine Brighton & Hove community group.
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The Kupala the Ukrainians created was a mixture of traditions recalled from the different parts of the country they came from, adapted both to the new setting and the traumatic situation in which they now found themselves. Much of the lore and the rituals would have looked familiar to the peasants described by the author of the 17th-century *Gustyn Chronicle*, probably based near Chernihiv in northern Ukraine, who identified the figure of Kupalo as a pagan god – and thus, in Christian eyes, a demon:

The commemoration of this demon Kupalo is still being celebrated in some of our lands by the foolish ... in the evening, the plain folk of both sexes come together, and they wind wreaths from edible herbs or roots. When they have wound the herbs around themselves, they light a fire. In another place, they erect a green branch and, holding hands, they circle around this fire, singing their songs in which Kupalo is mentioned. Then they jump over the aforesaid fire, dedicating themselves to this demon.³

Several hundred years later, Lesia Kyrylenko describes picking flowers on the morning of the festival, making them into wreaths, decorating a willow branch, dancing in a circle and singing Kupala songs.

The Christian frustration evident in the chronicler's account of the ritual illustrates one of the features of Kupala that has made it so appealing to Ukrainian communities at very different moments in history. It was given a Christian name, Ivana Kupala – Ivan, or John, is St John the Baptist, whose feast day falls around the time of the summer solstice – but the festival is Christian in name only. Nor was it ever a proper Soviet festival, although the authorities in the USSR did try to reinvent it as a celebration of agriculture. Natalie Kononenko, a scholar of Ukrainian folklore, argued in the early 2000s that its absence from church control and Soviet calendars made it a 'space outside all systems where alternative identities are explored'. After Ukraine became independent in 1991, Kupala 'became and has remained popular because it was one of the rituals through which Ukrainians ... began carving out a non-Soviet space and establishing a non-Soviet identity'.⁴ For the new Ukrainian community in Sussex, one of Kupala's roles is to sustain Ukrainian identity in a space safe from the Russian aggressor that denies Ukraine has an identity of its own.

Kupala in Brighton also reflects the identity of the community itself, shaped by the war. Ukrainian refugees are nearly all women and children, as men are barred (with limited exceptions) from leaving the country in case they are required to serve in the defence forces. That has sidelined one of Kupala's main traditional themes, young

Fig. 5: The Kupala 2023 drama
(right: director/performer
Anastasiia Bohdanova).
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Fig. 6: Yuliia Poliakova serves
Ukrainian food at Kupala in 2023.
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Fig. 7: Rusalka, the river spirit
played by Violetta Korbina.
© Marek Kohn.



Fig. 8: Lesia Kyrilenko and
her daughter Viktoriia.
© Maryna Litvinova.



unmarried women's search for husbands. On the night of Kupala they would go to a river, take off the flower-crowns they wore on their heads, and place the wreaths upon the water. If a woman's wreath was carried to the far bank, that would be where she would find her husband; if it stayed where it was, the time for her to marry had not yet come ... and if it sank, her current attachment would not last.

That particular tradition is completely absent from Kupala in Brighton: not only is there no river, but the theme of courtship risks being painful when men are far away, many of them fighting at the front. Nor, perhaps, does the quest for husbands fit especially well with the aspirations of the young women who devise and enact the Kupala rituals in Brighton. Instead, the symbols are used to bring together the community as a whole. Everybody joins in making the flower-crowns, known as *vinochky*, which are no longer restricted to young unmarried women. While some married women uphold tradition by not wearing them, others do – and so do one or two men.

This represents a subtle but significant difference between Kupala in Brighton and a trend that emerged in post-independence Ukrainian Ivana Kupala celebrations, in which modernisation diluted the folklore and turned the festivals into more generic summer party gatherings. Brighton's Kupala is modern, combining old folk songs with contemporary ones performed to pre-recorded backing tracks, but the modern songs draw on traditional forms, and support the traditions instead of supplanting them.

Relaxing the rules about who should wear *vinochky* makes the wreaths a more familiar element of Kupala, shared by a larger number of its participants, and thus helps to maintain them as a symbol. In Brighton, modernisation works to reinvent and reinvigorate Kupala, shaping it to serve the needs of the present moment.

At the 2023 Kupala, the key to that reshaping was the most intensely magical element of Kupala, the fern flower. This imaginary bloom is said to appear during the night of Kupala, and if anyone is fortunate enough to find it, they can make a wish that will come true. It became the pivotal device in a drama piece created by Anastasiia Bohdanova, the community's theatre director. The play wove Kupala themes into a narrative that set the festival into its contemporary context and addressed the question that hangs over it today: what is the place of a celebration in wartime?

The story began with three young women singing songs about love and finding a partner. They go to *vechornytsi*, courtship gatherings held in autumn and winter. In the past, these were usually hosted by an older woman in her home; nowadays the modern versions are held in venues such as community centres. It's at such a gathering that a young man, Ivanko, confesses his feelings for one of the women, Marichka. He proposes marriage, but then a war starts – which one is not specified, because it alludes to Ukraine's long history of wars, but his camouflage jacket points to the present conflict.

Kupala comes around; he is at the front, and she protests to the people around her that they can't sing and dance while a war is going on. They reply that the rituals are for keeping their traditions alive, not for having a party. Supported by her community, Marichka joins in with the preparations for Kupala, despite her feelings. Then she meets a widow who tells her she understands what she is going through, and points out that her fiancé may not yet be lost. Marichka sets out to find the fern flower, so that she can make a wish for his return. She finds it, makes the wish, and turns round to see Ivanko there, alive, together with other soldiers back safe from the frontline.

The couple wed, and the community celebrates, in a reworked version of the Kupala bonfire tradition. According to Kupala lore, if partners manage to keep holding hands as they jump the bonfire, they will stay together. In the Brighton celebration, the bonfire was symbolised by bands of red cloth, shaken to represent flames. The bride and groom held one of the bands between them, a little like a guard of honour, and the crowd jumped through in mixed-up pairs – adults, children, friends – rather than couples. It promised that the Ukrainian community would stay together, across generations: much of the impetus that helped bring Kupala to Brighton came from parents who wanted their children to know and practise Ukrainian culture, even though some of them had previously had little interest in the traditions themselves. Some had little experience of them either, having grown up in places where Ukrainian customs were not observed; they now welcomed the opportunity to learn the songs and dances for themselves.

It was also an act that helped to create a wider community. When Ukrainians jumped the 'bonfire' with their new local friends from Britain and other countries, it had the same symbolic meaning as when couples jumped real bonfires in Ukraine: that the relationship between them would be strong and enduring. One of the main reasons for holding a Kupala celebration in Brighton was that it offered a way to thank local people for their support, by sharing Ukrainian culture with them.

There was a fern flower quest in the woods for the children too, and everybody present was encouraged to make a wish while tying a ribbon to the *hilechko*, the decorated branch which is traditionally burned as a symbolic sacrifice. (In 2022, the custom was upheld by burning the *hilechko* in a brazier on Brighton's beach a couple of days later.) The fern flower is a symbol of hope – and a reminder that if a Ukrainian really found such a flower, there would be no question about what their wish would be. It is also an appeal to magic, echoed by the children's quest and the wish-tree, the reasons for which are tragically obvious. The Sunday afternoon gathering among the Preston Park trees was a ritual of collective self-enchancement, telling a magical story about hope and togetherness.

Not all the traditional characters took part. Effigies of Kupalo, the male figure identified by the 17th-century chronicler as a demon, often play the role of sacrificial

object that is assigned to the *hilechko* branch in Brighton. Kupalo did not feature, and neither did Marena, a female figure that plays a similar role in the midsummer rituals. Other supernatural beings were there, though: two restless female nature spirits and a goddess. Playing the role of a *rusalka* river spirit, Violetta Korbina explained that such beings are the unquiet souls of women or girls, whose lives or fates left them caught between the world of the dead and the world of the living.⁵ *Rusalka* is an unpredictable and potentially dangerous being, as is her forest counterpart, *Mavka*. The third of the trio, *Mara*, is a goddess of death.

Rusalka is known beyond the Slavic world as the central character of the opera of the same name by the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák, first performed in 1901. She also appears in a celebrated work written ten years later by Lesia Ukrainka, a major figure in 20th-century Ukrainian literature, 'The Forest Song' (the author's surname is a *nom de plume*; it means 'Ukrainian woman'). This fairy drama about the doomed love between the forest spirit *Mavka* and a young man is widely regarded as the founding text of Ukrainian fantasy literature, and is a poetic meditation on the relationship between humankind and the natural world.

At the Kupala festival, the spirit figures played a sharply different role in reflections on the effects of human actions upon nature. The three characters stationed themselves in front of information panels that took visitors from the folkloric elements of Kupala to the impact of Russian aggression on Ukraine's culture, people and environment. As a water spirit, *Rusalka* was given the task of talking about the flooding caused by the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka dam a month previously. The inseparability of tradition, history, culture, and the current war is a feature of all the Ukrainians' performances and presentations in Sussex. They are constantly striving to find ways to communicate with the larger communities of which they have become part – including addressing them in the guise of supernatural beings from Ukrainian folklore. The most pressing reason is the need to raise funds to support Ukraine, but their efforts also express the strength of their desire to talk about who they are and why they are here.

Kupala itself may become more closely integrated with its new cultural landscape. In Brighton it has been celebrated at the point that has become traditional in the Ukrainian calendar, around 6 or 7 July, putting it at a remove from British and other European midsummer festivals. Ivana Kupala became displaced from the summer solstice through its nominal Christianisation, by which it became tied to the Old Style calendar used by eastern Orthodox churches. In the face of Russia's imperialistic insistence that Ukraine is not an authentic nation, the old system of dates looks like a Russian frame that distorts Ukraine's symbolic calendar. Brighton's Kupala may follow Ukraine's Christmas, which in 2023 was officially detached from the traditional date of 7 January and moved to 25 December – a symbolic move towards integration with

the rest of Europe. Realigning Kupala with midsummer will make it easier for the festival to be seen, and practised, as part of a shared cultural tradition. As with folk music, there are rich opportunities for intercultural exchange; not just with British folkloric traditions, but also those of other communities who celebrate midsummer and have a presence in England.

Looking at Kupala from two different but strongly compatible perspectives, Ukrainian and Anglo-Polish, while participating in it at very different levels – leading organiser and local volunteer helper – we see many other possibilities in it. Our Kupala Brighton project aims to use the Brighton Kupala festival as a focus and a point of departure for an exploration of the role of traditional culture in contemporary Ukrainian society, both among refugees and in the homeland – an exploration that will offer striking perspectives on culture and identity across Europe in general. It also aims to develop exchanges beyond the festival itself, with writers, arts practitioners and academics. If it's successful, it will lead to insights, analyses and reflective commentaries. But it will remain the product of a shared enchantment, with the flowers, the songs, the spirits and the conjured sense of place that cast a midsummer spell over an English city park.

Marek Kohn and Vladyslava Bondar

Notes

1. 'Lesia's Kupala', Kupala Brighton website, <https://kupalabrighton.org/lesia.html> (accessed 23 March 2024).
2. Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 311.
3. Ullrich R. Kleinhenkel and Igor O. Klimov, *Herbs and the Evolution of Human Societies*, ed. Yue Yue and Molly Chatalic (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2022), 112; 36річник Козацьких літописів : Густийський, Самійла Величка. Грабінки / упоряд. та переклад: В. Крехотень, В. Шевчук, Р. Іванченко (Х. : Дніпро, 2006), 976 с.
4. Natalie Kononenko, 'Karaoke Ivan Kupalo: Ritual in Post-Soviet Ukraine', *Slavic and East European Journal* (2004), 48 (2): 177–202.
5. 'Rusalka', Kupala Brighton website, <https://kupalabrighton.org/rusalka.html> (accessed 23 March 2024).

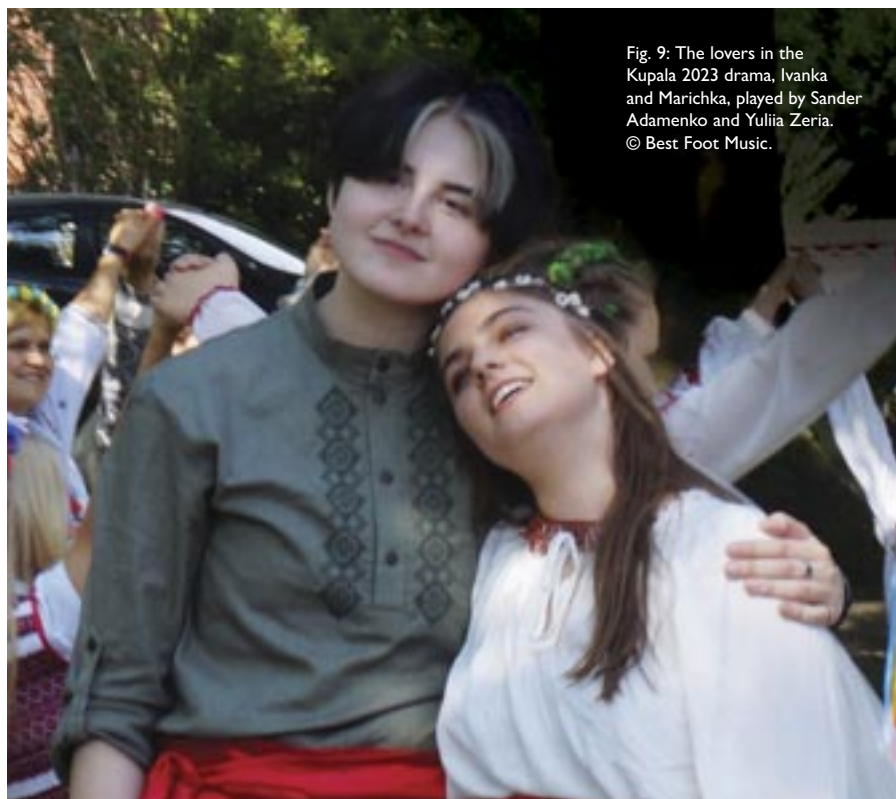


Fig. 9: The lovers in the Kupala 2023 drama, Ivanka and Marichka, played by Sander Adamenko and Yuliia Zeria.
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Fig. 10 Hanging ribbons on the hilechko and making wishes.
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