



Rusalka Opera Project Proposal:

Eva Buryakovsky

Rusalka Project Statement:

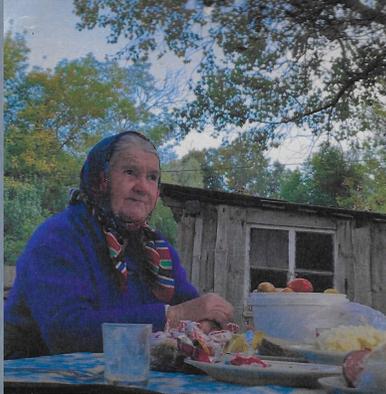
This project reimagines Rusalka, the water spirit from Antonin Dvorak's 1900 opera, by intertwining its themes of humanity versus nature with the haunting historical context of the Chernobyl disaster. The Slavic myth of the Rusalka, a spirit caught between worlds, finds new resonance in the Exclusion Zone, a place where human presence has faded, yet nature thrives in defiant resurgence. Drawing inspiration from Rusalka Week, an ancient Slavic ritual where straw dolls were adorned, cast away, and burned, the costume reflects this cyclical process of destruction and renewal. Rusalka strips away her woven belt, sleeves, headpiece, and root-like braids to integrate into the human world, only to rediscover them in Act 3, when she embraces her true nature once more. At its core, this interpretation speaks to the resilience of both nature and the human spirit. The Samosely, those who returned to Chernobyl despite the risks, mirror Rusalka's liminal existence in Act 3, refusing to relinquish their connection to the land. Their defiance against displacement, like plants and wildlife's slow reclamation of the Zone, underscores an enduring bond between humanity and nature. The opera's music deepens this narrative. In Act 1, Rusalka's "Song to the Moon" is not just a plea for love but a reflection of displacement, echoing those uprooted by disaster. As she enters the human world in Act 2, Dvorak's warm, folk-inspired themes give way to colder, chromatic harmonies, symbolising her alienation. By Act 3, as Rusalka rediscovers her discarded elements, the music returns to the eerie, nature-infused soundscape of Act 1, but now darker, mirroring Chernobyl's ghostly ruins. The tragic conclusion embodies nature's quiet, unstoppable resurgence, making the opera's music active in this tale of exile, survival, and renewal.

Garsington Opera's Pavilion, set against the Chiltern Hills, provides an ideal setting for a reimagined Rusalka Opera that explores the fragile relationship between humanity and nature. Garsington presents four operas each summer, allowing audiences to experience performances while immersed in the surrounding landscape (Garsington Opera, 2025). This unique setting only highlights the themes of wildlife, rural life, and ancient craft traditions, making it the perfect stage for a Chernobyl-influenced Rusalka production. By relocating Rusalka to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, this adaptation deepens the opera's exploration of a world where human absence has allowed nature to reclaim its power. The stark contrast between destruction and renewal becomes even more poignant in the Pavilion's open setting, where the tension between human presence and the natural environment is vivid. The production would highlight how nature persists and flourishes, even in places scarred by catastrophe, which will be heightened with the audience's ability to witness the landscape beyond the stage (Corney & Barrow, 2023). In my storyboards, Rusalka's world is visually divided between distressed organic environments (where she interacts with Jezibaba) and harsh industrial spaces (where she lives with the Prince). The Pavilion's open setting creates a dynamic interplay between these contrasting worlds. For example, at dusk, silhouettes of real trees could blend into the stage design, deepening the sense of a forested landscape reminiscent of the Chernobyl forest. Likewise, the trees and sky could be subtly lit to merge with Rusalka's world, extending her reality beyond the stage and immersing the audience in this haunting, atmospheric adaptation.

In the workshop, the costume effectively conveyed Rusalka's deep connection to her natural environment. Her braids functioned as an extension of herself and an integral part of her world, seamlessly blending the character with her surroundings. Inspired by ancient Slavic witchcraft dolls, the costume gave her a doll-like appearance, reinforcing themes of mysticism and transformation. As Rusalka danced and evolved, she became increasingly intertwined with the references that inspired her. Her playfulness and naivety in Act 1 were expressed through her ability to interact with her costume as if it were a separate character. Each component could be removed, transformed, and manipulated, allowing the costume to function as an individual presence and a part of the set design. This dynamic approach resulted in a more nuanced and prolonged transformation than initially envisioned. If I were to refine one aspect of the costume, it would be the sleeves. While conceptually cohesive with the overall design, their shape was not as flattering on the performer in motion. Given more time, I would redesign this element to enhance its functionality. Working with material performativity was a new and valuable design method for me. The concept of the braids enveloping Rusalka's body first emerged during the maquette workshop, and through further development, I refined this idea into a more cohesive textile structure for the final costume. Similarly, material collages of character costume drawings allowed me to explore each character's transformation through the textiles they were composed of. Assigning specific materials to the two worlds and creating interplay became the most effective way to build my interpretation of the Rusalka universe. This material world-building and character breakdown significantly influenced the final costume's realisation. The breakdown process shaped material choices and silhouette construction, ensuring the design aligned with the character's journey. However, it was during the toiling process that the costume came to life. Notably, certain elements that worked well in two-dimensional sketches, such as the sleeves, did not translate effectively onto the moving body. This experience has provided valuable insights for future costume projects. Moving forward, I plan to incorporate more three-dimensional visualisations earlier in the design process, allowing me to anticipate construction challenges and ensure compatibility with movement-based performances from the beginning.

Concept Themes :

Danger Zone Inhabitants



Kiyevskaya, Grandma in Chernobyl, 2021

Witchcraft



Mogilyansky, 'Young Lady' Doll, 1899

Craft



Madlevskaya, Necklace, Late 18th Century Russia, 2024

Wildlife



Kreosan Vlog, Pripyat Radioactive Exclusion Zone, 2023

Rural Life



Ptushkin, Chernobyl Today, 2019

Industrial Life



Ptushkin, Chernobyl Today, 2019

Chernobyl Disaster



Jones, Chernobyl: The Lost Tapes, 2022

Nature Prevails Through Human-Made Catastrophe



Jones, Chernobyl: The Lost Tapes, 2022

Post-Apocalyptic Slavic Society



Varlamov, 90's Street Photography, Moscow, 2018

Ancient Slavic Society



Moscow State Historical Museum, Textile Workers, 19th Century, 2019

Performance Setting Materiality →



Fuller, Orfeo Opera, 2022

Performance Context Board: Garsington Opera Company

Context of Performance

- Garsington Opera Company presents four performances in the summer period each year in the Opera pavilion on Chiltern Hills (Garsington Opera, 2025)
- Setting of the space enables the audience to view the beautiful surrounding landscape
- The company also engages the local community in their productions (Corney & Barrow, 2023)
- It is the perfect space to stage Chernobyl-influenced Rusalka, where the theme of Humanity vs Nature is amplified



Garsington Opera, Opera Festival, 2025



Pritchard, Garsington Opera Rusalka, 2022



Hospitality & Catering News, Garsington Opera, 2025

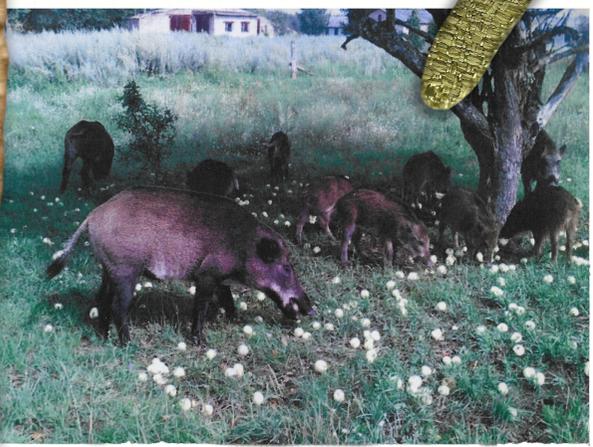


Media, Demountable Pavilion, 2025



Garsington Opera, Garsington Manor, 2025

Act 1,
Rusalka World:



Kotova, Chernobyl Biosphere Reserve, 2018



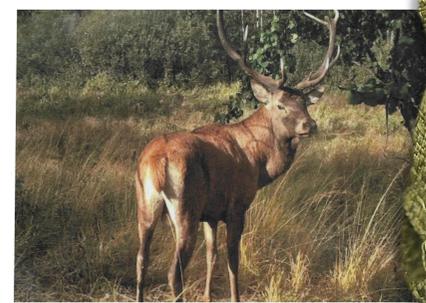
Committee on Culture and Tourism of Podolsk,
Trinity: Traditions and Rituals, 2017



Oglesby, Geyser Basin, 2008



deCaires Taylor, Coral Carnival, 2023



Hashchak, Deer of the
Chernobyl Zone, 2019



Batha, Effigy of Morana, 2012, Gillyon, Pripyat Amusement Park, 2014

Rusalka World
Materiality:





Jones, Chernobyl: The Lost Tapes, 2022

Act 2, Human World:



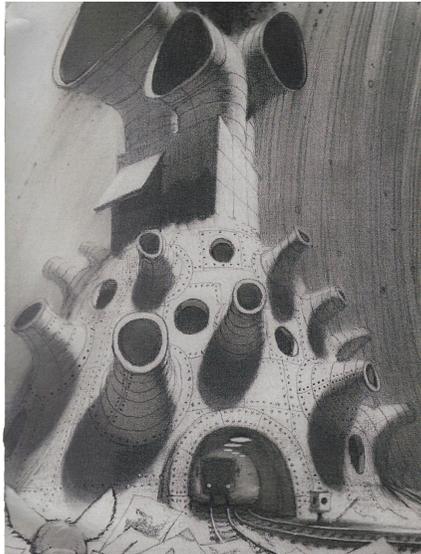
Cold War Museum, Bunker 42, 1951



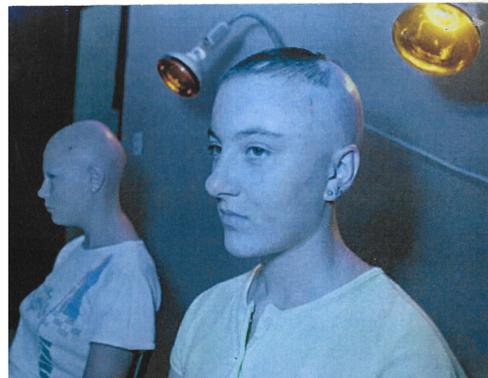
Ayurzana, Consciousness, 2022



Gaudi, Palau Güell, 1887



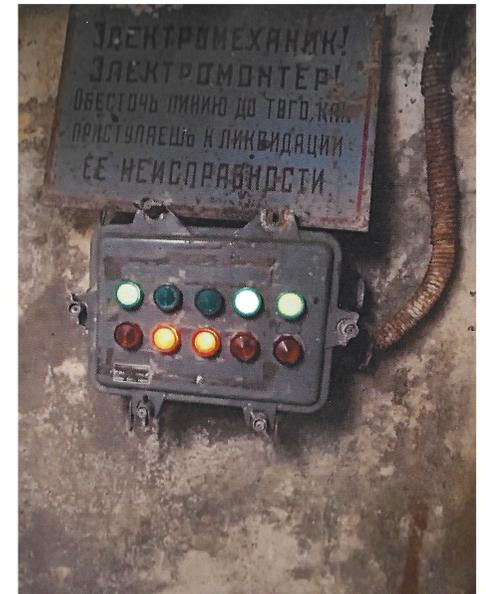
Chelushkin, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, 2018



Roque, Victims of Nuclear Disaster, 1994



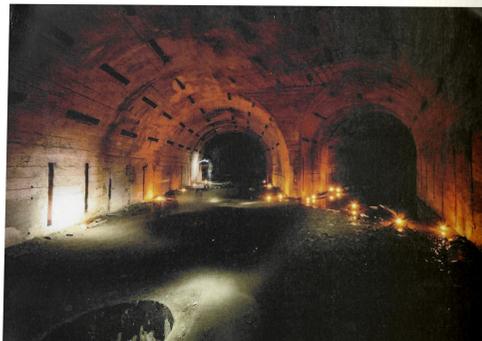
Yin, Liu Jing in Her Apartment, 2014



Underground Moscow Museum, Bunker 703, 2020



Rogozhkin, The Third Planet, 1991



Zaitsev, Bunker 'Alsu-2' ('Object 221'), 2012

Human World
Materiality:



Rusalka Character Board:



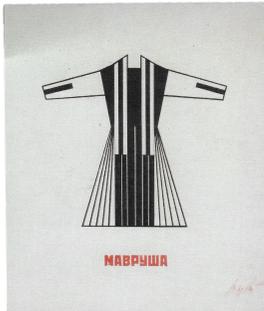
Madlevskaya, 19th Century Necklace
Vologda Province, 2024



Gorshenina, Uprooted, 2022



Ershov, Bast Shoes, 1962



Stepanova, 'Tarelkin's Death' Play
Costume Sketch, 1922



Madlevskaya, 19th Century
Kokoshnik Kostroma Region, 2022



Kulturologia, Ritual figurines, 2022



Batanov, Balaklava Underground
Museum, 2017



Act 3



Act 2



Act 1

Rusalka Character

- Immortal maiden
- A witchcraft doll desperate to be human
- In Act 1, She is deeply rooted in Earth and woven from the remains of Soviet attire and straw (shown through her sleeves, headpiece, belt, and 'root' braids on her shoulders)
- During the transformation she is stripped of all her organic elements, her doll-like dress turns into a hazmat suit
- In Act 3, she returns to nature by placing the textile 'root' braids back on her shoulders, however, now they are vulnerable and decaying
- "Neither alive nor dead, neither woman nor nymph, accursed, I wander as a phantom."

Rusalka's Process
of Transformation

Costume Materials



Prince Character Board:



Batanov, Balaklava Underground Museum, 2017



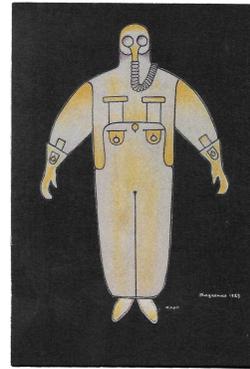
Jones, Chernobyl:
The Lost Tapes, 2022



Varlamov, 90's Street Photography, Moscow, 2018



Chelushkin,
Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland, 2018



Rodchenko, Costume
Design for Bedbug, 1913



↑ Prince: Act 3



↑ Prince's Process
of Transformation
Prince: Acts 1-2

Prince Character

- Young man, early 20s
- His world is full of cold material possessions
- Looks like an industrial metal structure
- Plastic materials surround his body
- In the human world, rotting plants start growing out of him
- In Act 3, all the material and technological elements surrounding him begin malfunctioning.
- "From the embrace of a mysterious power, save me!"

↑
Costume Materials

↑ Prince's Process
of Transformation

↑ Costume Materials



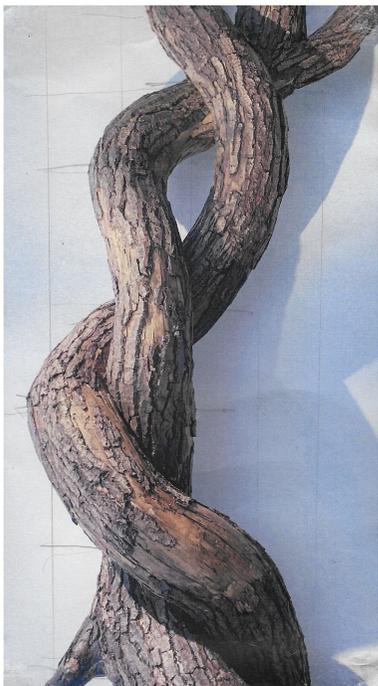
Maiorov, Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, 2021



Russian Ethnographic Museum, 20th Century Udmurt Doll, 2019



Virtanen, Women's Magazine 1929, 2021



Oliveira, Human Nature, 2023



State Historical Museum, 20th Century Ukrainian Headdress Kapilushnya, 2019



Vintage Everyday, Kichka Headdress from Ryazan Province, 2018



State Historical Museum, Women's Clothing Ukraine 1939, 2019



Osipova, Wearable Sculpture, 2022

Tezibaba:
Acts 1-3



Jezipaba Character

- Immortal elderly woman
- Lives in between the human and spirit worlds
- Has part-human, part-animal attributes (horns on her head, claws)
- Is made up of felt, wool, decaying Soviet cloth, straw, metal and plastic
- She is able to withstand and coexist in both worlds (this is shown through her 'Human' world and 'Rusalka' world materiality)
- "You yourself are a natural element; you yourself are a human"

Tezibaba
Character Board:



Rodchenko, Sketch of a Man's Suit, 1920



State Historical Museum, Kartyuz Headwear From Novgorod District 1880, 2019



Jones, Chernobyl: The Lost Tapes, 2022



Oliveira, Human Nature, 2023



Russian Ethnographic Museum, 19th Century Ukrainian Men's Costume, 2019



Kulturologia, Straw Doll-Amulets, 2022



Pavlyych, Peasant, 1908



Batanov, Balaklava Underground Museum, 2017

Vodnik Character Board:

↓ Costume Materials

Vodnik: Acts 1+3



Vodnik: Act 2

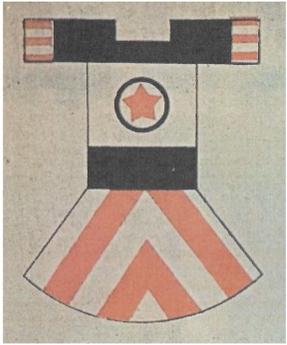


Vodnik's Process of Transformation



Vodnik Character

- Immortal elderly man (is actually a straw sculpture)
- In beginning of Act 1, is distinctively joyful about his world (however, over the course of the opera, he becomes more melancholic)
- He is made out of straw, unrefined linen, felt, bits of tree bark (all of which distinguishes him as non-human)
- In the human world, Vodnik morphs with the inorganic materials such as plastic and metal (becomes a decaying industrial structure)
- "Your water seeks you everywhere, in vain wanting to embrace you!"



Stepanova, Designs for Sports Clothing, 1923



Bakhtiozina, Analogue From Summer, 2022



Russian Ethnographic Museum, 19th Century Haircut doll 1, 2019



Russian Ethnographic Museum, 19th Century Haircut doll 3, 2019



Mukhin, Pussy Riot, 2012



Virtanen, Sketches By Vyacheslav Zaitsev 1963, 2021



Alexey, Holiday in the Village, 186



Russian Ethnographic Museum, 19th Century Haircut doll 1, 2019

The Naiads

- Immortal creatures that look like young maidens
- Their world is full of games and joy, however, it feels shallow
- Their eternal lives lack meaning
- Just like Rusalka and Vodnik, they are made out of straw, plant roots and remains of Soviet fabrics
- All three are woven together like Slavic witchcraft dolls
- Similar to Rusalka, their braids connect them to the natural environment they exist in like roots
- In the human world their materiality would turn brittle and shrivel up like a dying plant
- "Your sadness wafts fear into our happy playing", "What's spoiling our merry games?"

Naiads: Acts 1&3

Costume Materials



Naiads Character Board:

Storyboard 1: Rusalka and Tezibaba

Possible Set Design Materials →

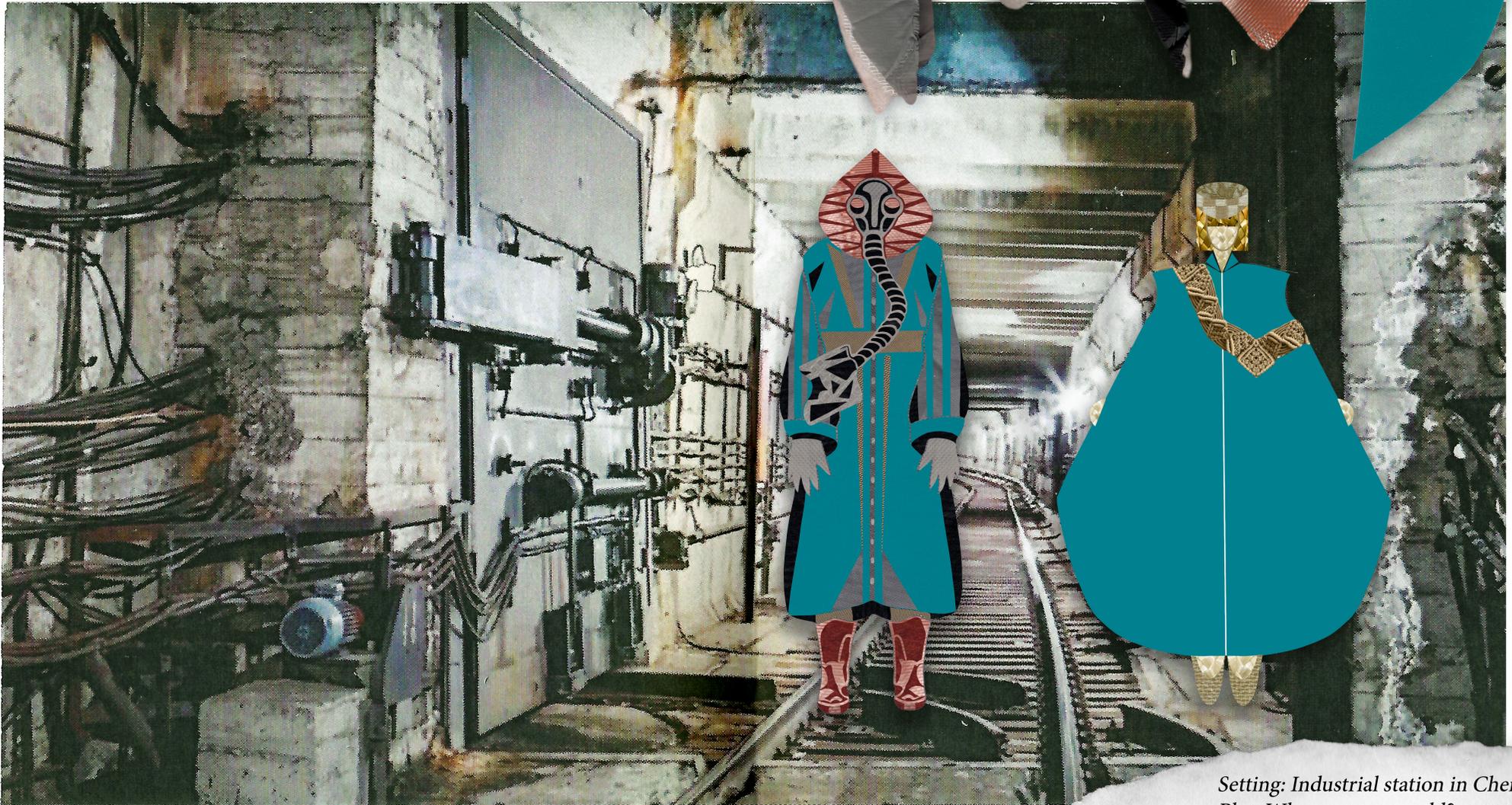
Setting: Abandoned building in Chernobyl
Plot: Asking for a spell
Sound: Almost silent
Emotion: Nervous
Music: "Staleta moudrost tva vsechno vi"



Untermaierhofer, Pripyat Middle School Mural, 2020

Act 1, Scene 6

Storyboard 2: Rusalka and Prince
Possible Set Design Materials →



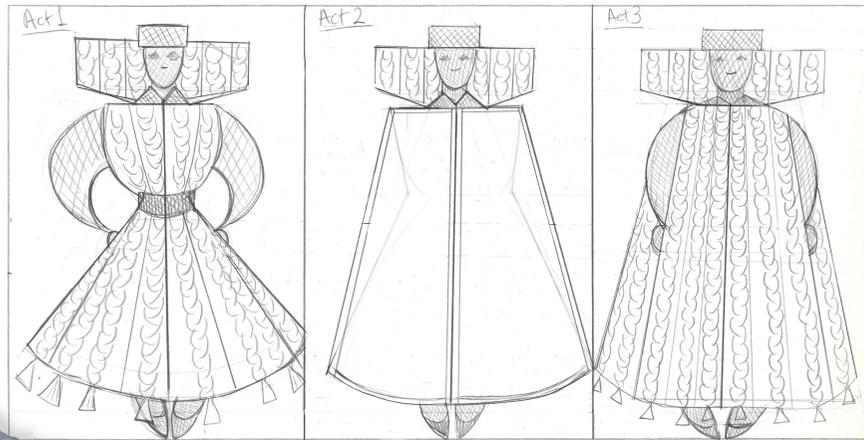
Popov, Underground Cherkizovskaya Station in Moscow, 2016

Act 2, Scene 2

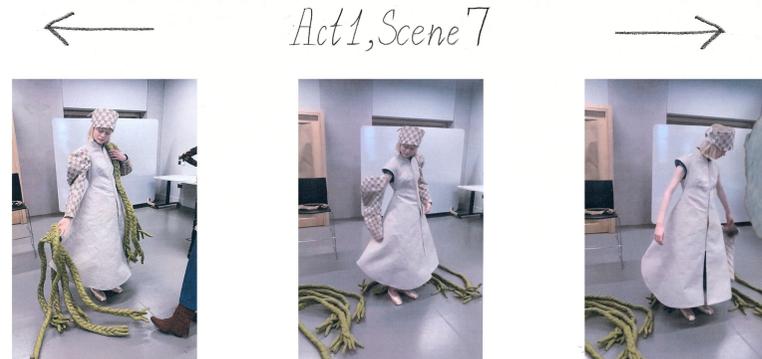
Setting: Industrial station in Chernobyl
Plot: Why are you so cold?
Sound: Mechanical noises
Emotion: Distressed
Music: "Jiz tyden dlis mi po boku"

Storyboard 3:

Key Moments in Rusalka's Story From Acts 1-3

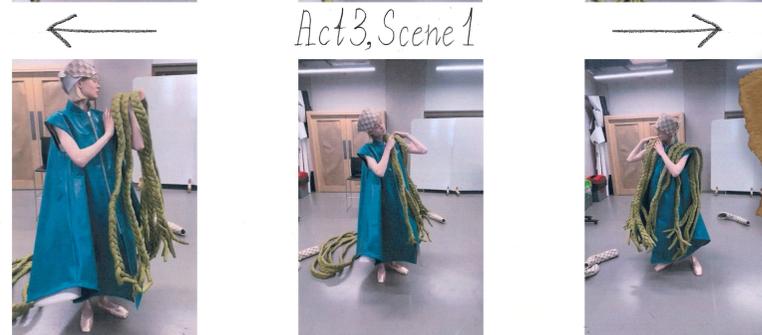


Rusalka's Transformation Drawing



Act 1, Scene 7

Setting: Abandoned building in Chernobyl
 Plot: Transformation
 Sound: Pained screams
 Emotion: Fear and pain
 Music: "Cury mury fuk"



Act 3, Scene 1

Setting: Chernobyl forest
 Plot: Why don't I perish?
 Sound: Hissing steam
 Emotion: No hope left
 Music: "Necitelna vodni moci"



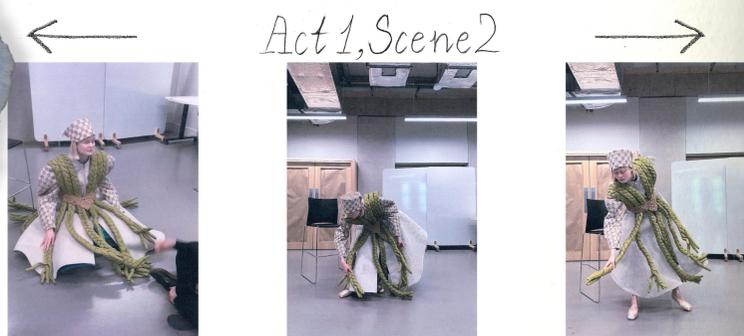
Act 3, Scene 7

Setting: Chernobyl forest
 Plot: In search for Rusalka
 Sound: Hissing steam
 Emotion: Madness and despair
 Music: "Bila moje lani!"



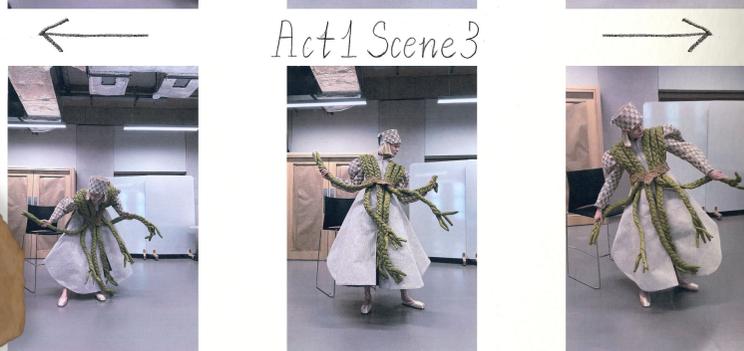
Act 3, Scene 8

Setting: Chernobyl forest
 Plot: Last reunion
 Sound: Crumbling earth
 Emotion: Despair and love
 Music: "Milacku, znas mne, znas?"



Act 1, Scene 2

Setting: Chernobyl forest
 Plot: I want to be human
 Sound: Animals in the forest
 Emotion: Dreamy
 Music: "Hastrmanku, taticku!"



Act 1, Scene 3

Setting: Chernobyl Forest
 Plot: Lust for Prince
 Sound: Almost silent
 Emotion: Intense longing
 Music: "Sem casto prichazi"

"I want to be human!"



Act 1, Scene 2

"Why don't I perish?"



Act 3, Scene 1

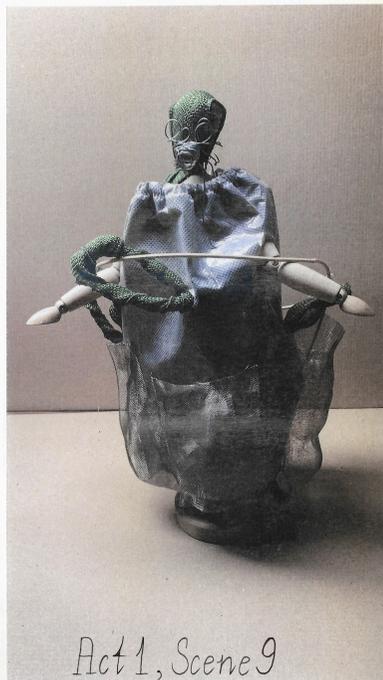
Process Page 1:

Initial Maquettes and Drawings of Rusalka Acts 1-3

Materials Used



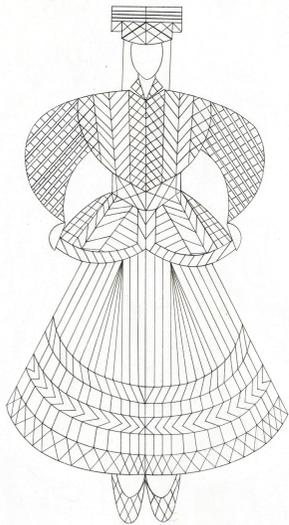
"Are you human or a fairytale?"



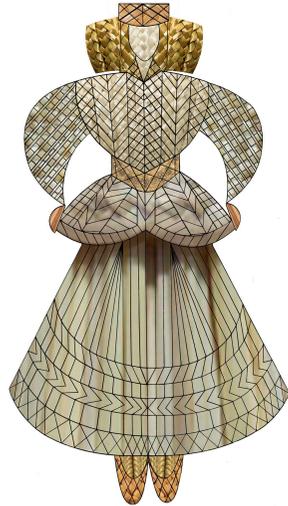
Act 1, Scene 9

Process Page 2: Initial Exploration of Rusalka's Transformation Through Material Collage

Initial Ink Drawing



Rusalka's Base



Act 1



Act 2



Act 3



Initial Exploration of Prince's Character Through Material Collage

Initial Ink Drawing



Prince's Base



Act 2



Act 1



Materials Used



Process Page 3:
Rusalka Costume Silhouette Development



Rusalka's Base Dress



Act 1 Dress With Braids



Act 2 Cape



Act 3 Cape With Braids

Changes In The Material Collages
Affected The First Fitting Toile



Dress From The Front



Dress From The Back



Dress With Cape



Dress From The Side



All Trial Samples



Final Material Choice

Chosen Braid Textile



Finalised Samples



Final Braid Variation

On Final Character Designs



Rusalka: Act 1



Rusalka: Act 2



Prince: Act 3



Vodnik: Acts 1+3



Vodnik: Act 2



Naiads: Acts 1&3

Realised Storyboard 1: Act 1, Scene 2



I want to be human!

Realised Storyboard 2: Act 1 Scene 3



Longing for the Prince



Realised Storyboard 3: Act 1, Scene 7



Transformation

Realised Storyboard 4: Act 3, Scene 1



Why don't I perish?



Realised Storyboard 5: Act 3, Scene 7



My fairytale, come back to me!

Realised Storyboard 6: Act 3, Scene 8



Last reunion



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