It is now well known that the Ukrainian president is a former comic, but this is a misleading representation of his past career. Volodymyr Zelensky is a seasoned performer with a string of professional roles, including the voice of Paddington Bear (the Ukrainian language version), Love in the Big City and 8 New Dates.

In a strange quirk of fate, he most recently played a fictional school teacher unexpectedly elected as the Ukrainian president in Servant of the People (now being shown on Channel 4 in the UK to up the weirdness of the situation). The series helped catapult Zelensky to a landslide victory in the real-life 2019 presidential elections.

Now the world is in awe of this heroic man courageously leading his country from the depths of war-torn Kiev. His passionate speeches reduce people to tears and inspire governments.
His superior communication skills influence world leaders through an intense bombardment of factual statements. Well researched questions with solutions are presented, demonstrating thoughtfulness and intelligence, while he is unafraid to show emotion when describing the distress of his country’s circumstances.

Zelensky’s appointment as president may have been influenced by his presidential acting role, but his performance skills are now just as crucial in the propaganda war. Where conflict is constantly live streamed or heavily censored through social media and television, performance skills play a major part in winning the battle for information.

The president’s experience as a skilled performer reveals a useful armoury of weapons now being deployed against the might of the Russian invasion. So how did Zelensky’s career in performance prepare him for the role of his life?

### Useful skills for leaders

The core skills required in actors are remarkably similar to diplomatic skills: a range of strengths and abilities that enable professionals to manage professional relationships. Memorisation, creativity, reading, speaking and teamwork highlight a few aptitudes. However, the ability to change one’s personality to communicate a message in a controlled and meaningful manner is proving to be a key skill for Zelensky.

Zelensky trained as a lawyer, but the draw of television led him to create Kvartal 95, a production company specialising in comedy and romcoms. He wrote, produced and starred in many productions, making good use of his creativity, business skills and background in law. Unwittingly, Zelensky built his portfolio of presidential skills long before he knew he was going to undertake that role.
In 2015, he created the role of Vasyl Goloborodko in Servant of the People. This character is very different from the grave, unshaven persona we now see daily. Goloborodko is an unhappy citizen who seethes over crooked political leaders, and publicises his disgust through videos attacking public figures. This is an example of dramatic acting for television, where his skills are creating the emotions and effect desired for an audience.

Zelensky also showcases advanced writing skills. Servant of the People is not a ground-breaking series, but it does demonstrate how television functions as a vehicle for an actor, delivers an enjoyable viewing experience and attracts decent viewing figures.

**Inhabiting his role**

On Thursday February 24 2022, Zelensky appeared on Ukrainian television with an air of gravitas not usually associated with him. I am in no way suggesting that Zelensky was acting, of course. But the skills he has learned and nourished through performance help him to present his message with gravitas concisely and under exceptionally pressurised circumstances. He adopts a calm, reassuring but patriotic manner in his first speech to the Ukrainian people through his intense and earnest delivery.

Sincerity and authenticity are immediately obvious and both are key skills required of an actor and screenwriter. In contrast, Zelensky’s broadcast after the bombing of the children’s hospital in Mariupol, exhibits a calm, yet determined approach.

Dramatic pauses allow the viewer time to digest the seriousness of the situation. His skilfully utilised tone also implies an underlying desperation, delivered straight through the camera into the eyes of the people at home.

Whether in war or peace time, a leader needs suitable imagery the public can relate to. Margaret Thatcher’s adviser Gordon Reece was concerned about her public image in the 1979 elections. He employed the skills of voice coaches from the Royal National Theatre to transform her shrill voice to a softer, deeper tone that suggested empathy with the public. The Ukrainian leader understands this too.
When Zelensky recently addressed the the UK parliament he displayed no evidence of being overwhelmed or under pressure. Contemplate the preparation required to deliver such an important speech from a war bunker as his country is being destroyed. The skills he learned as an actor, such as focus, communication, dispelling nerves and emotional sincerity are crucial for audience engagement, particularly under these grave circumstances.

Zelensky’s address received a 30-second standing ovation and was broadcast around the world. This speech was as important for its delivery as its content, the optics of it key for sending Putin a message. But it was written for a British audience, reminding us of turning points in the country’s history. Zelensky spoke and the world listened, revealing just how much publicity is playing a major part of this war.

The Ukrainian president has earned respect for himself and his people through this crisis. He keeps the focus on the atrocities advocated by Putin by communicating directly through key outlets, using social media to break down the propaganda wall around the Russian people.

In doing so Zelensky is continuing to do what he knows best to help end the conflict to Ukraine’s advantage. Whether he has the tactical skills to navigate a war with a superpower is another matter.

We tell our students that performance can change the world and performers are advocates of that change. Though Zelensky is now a man surviving by his wits, love of country and a cool head, his demeanour is informed by years of performance. Only this time there’s no playacting in the theatre of war.