



Causal Connection Between Past and Present



Without a doubt, Ukrainian theatre is deeply embedded in the country's search for national identity. It has persevered through the prohibition of Ukrainian language, the inferiority complex, the perception of Russian art as the standard that was to be imitated. Everything created outside of such norm, everything that even tried to seek out new forms of expression and to touch on the topic of European experience was revolutionary.



Kyiv drama theatre in Podil

The most notable and tragic figure in the history of Ukrainian theatre is director Les' Kurbas. At the end of the first decade of the XX century, he wrote about the "journey to psychological Europe, and therefore, to yourself." His days were filled with art workshops, searching for new art forms and experimental work. He worked with contemporary authors and created timely and provocative productions that uncovered the reality of the country. And, at the age of 50, he and the playwright he closely worked with were brutally executed. This story feels like it might be from another time, but it happened less than 80 years ago. The tyranny of russification was so powerful that in the 80s some provincial Ukrainian theatre companies started to perform in Russian. That is why, even after the collapse of the Soviet regime, Ukrainian theatres oftentimes abandoned the renewed search for self-identity in favour of profitability. The lack of civic consciousness led to theatre repertoire stagnation in the 1990s and in the first decade of the 2000s. While talented Ukrainian playwrights and directors had no choice but to realize their projects abroad (mostly, of course, in Russia), the Ukrainian theatre scene almost wholly ignored contemporary drama. The repertoire of that time mainly consisted of classic dramas, western boulevard comedies and melodramas.

Now, we are the ones responsible for the future...

Since 2013, Ukraine went through a time of significant changes: the revolution of dignity, the beginning of the war, occupation, pro-Russia provocations, sanctions etc. As a result, Russian performers and theatres were prohibited by law from entering Ukrainian territory. The entertainment industry was suffering shortages of commercial product without its most notable and active dealer. Naturally, the demand for local productions skyrocketed. When it comes to the movie industry, the number of orders and projects rose significantly. Ukrainian actors were highly sought-after. All people, who had previously spent money on entertainment of Russian origin could redirect those means to support Ukrainian theatres. Suddenly, shows were sold out and venues fully booked. In just a couple of years, ticket sales went from 30 % to 80 %, 95 % during the main season. Furthermore, the age range of the audience expanded. However, with the increased interest, the demands and expectations of the people rose too, as their newly-found appetites couldn't be satisfied by the outdated repertoire and old forms of expression. Intense competition between theatres now made a lot of sense and was used as a foundation principle when it came to building new development strategies.



Wild theatre

Moreover, theatre changed the way in which current issues were addressed. Extreme changes in the country needed to be reflected upon, and artists found themselves unable to ignore current issues while working in government-supported establishments. At the same time, they couldn't afford the luxury of losing the biggest part of their audience - people who were mainly seeking entertainment and distraction from the hard reality of daily news. All these factors led to a number of amateur companies and independent theatres sprouting up all over Ukraine. There, the work was completed not only by beginners and volunteers but also by professional theatre workers. These kinds of theatres were occupying niche movements, such as documentary theatre, immersive art, plastic (physical) theatre, social riot, etc. They were Europe-oriented groups of artists, aspiring to bring new forms and trends to Ukrainian theatre.

At the same time, this transformative period also led to shifts in the hierarchy of directors. Suddenly, leadership and power in the theatrical process went to unknown young directors and producers aged 20-40. Some of them preferred to uphold the legacy of their teachers, but some others proposed entirely different views on reforms. So, all of this has brought us to where we are now: a time of competition and of trying to push new ideas onto the market.

Some of the most active government theatres in Ukraine are: Molodyy Theater, Golden Gate Theater, Kiev Podil Theater, Theater Lesya in Lviv, and Les Kurbas Theater in Lviv, Franko Theater in Ivano-Frankivsk, Kiev Theater on the Left Bank of the Dnieper, and many others.



New opportunities

This revolution in Ukrainian theatre still attracts attention from European representatives.

Various conventions are sending delegates to learn more about Ukrainian theatre experience and offering their help. For the new generation of theatre workers, it is crucial to have an opportunity to study and intern in European theatres. They become active participants in various scholarship and exchange programs all around the world; getting involved in global competitions, laboratories, local and European supported festivals. In turn, the same people go on to become crisis managers for governmental theatres in Kyiv and other regions. Due to this “rejuvenation,” contemporary playwrights like Natalka Vorozhbit, Pavlo Arye, Vira Makoviy, Kira Malinina, Tatiana Kitsenko, Dan and Yana Gumennyh, Natalia Blok, Vitaliy Chenskiy and others, have had the opportunity to see their work be turned into full-blown productions. Contemporary Ukrainian drama becomes a tool of self-reflection and a way of continuously moving forward. It offers new topics, characters, and broadens the genre spectrum. Audience members now have an opportunity to live through an emotional experience. They go to the theatre to vent their feelings, get support, and take a step towards healing and an objective view of the situation. But theatre also has the power to connect and reconcile people from different regions of the country, start a dialogue between nationalities, religions etc. Human rights, equality, personal freedom, self-expression of an individual – those are the titular subjects of experimental theatre performances today.

Moreover, Ukrainian theatre festivals are not just exhibitions of different unrelated pieces. They usually have a leitmotif – a main idea that they want to project throughout all elements of the event. Thereby, a play becomes more than just a way of delivering the message. Some of the most famous Ukrainian festivals are: “Eastern ExPress,” “Dofa.fund”, “GOGOLFEST,” “ParedeFest,” “Moloko.”

Additionally, cooperation with the European Theatre Convention, the European theatre network IETM, the Goethe-Institut and the British Council supply vital resources for further development and communication.

Existence

Independent Theatre is solely created and supported by the demand from audience members, who want to engage in an honest conversation. It can be a political arena, with high levels of sarcasm and self-irony. It can be a documentary-style theatre, which portrays intimate feelings of people caught in the middle of recent historical events. The audience for this kind of theatre is young. It is comprised of people between the ages of 16 and 40.

On the other hand, there arises the question of existing without any financial support from the government. These theatres constitute giant structures, which cannot be sustained by ticket sales only.

In today's Ukraine, there is virtually no way to copy the methods of European project-based theatre. Lacking the financial buffer leaves no opportunity for failure, so it is not possible to do only one project at a time. That is precisely why the independent theatre structure in Ukraine resembles the traditional theatre so much. By continuously running more successful projects, a theatre is creating a much-needed financial safety net.

National theatres are struggling to maintain the quality and the number of productions due to the limited funding opportunities. Usually, the funding they receive from the government is barely enough to cover the expenses for actors' salaries and utilities. Even when they receive additional funding, it is minimal and gets taxed by 20 %. At the same time, independent theatres are forced to live in constant states of financial risk, without a permanent venue, rehearsal space, or the ability to pay a set company of actors. All these expenses, plus the value of the production and the budget for the next project, must be covered by ticket sales. Despite the existence of a set repertoire, employees in the independent theatre are paid on a project-to-project basis. The only good Samaritan of Ukrainian independent theatres are the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation and various European grants. Unfortunately, this system only helps finance the first initial performance, but not any of the consecutive performances. Notwithstanding, as of 2019, 28 state theatres and more than 100 independent theatres have been registered in Kyiv.

Wild Theatre is one of the most popular independent theatres in Ukraine, founded in February 2016. They create and perform acute-social pieces, contemporary plays as well as different independent theatrical projects, performance-biopics, and musicals. Provocation, action and shock are the primary tools of their radical and immersive theatre practice. They have already staged more than 20 projects, assembled an ever-changing cast of a total of 120 actors from various theatres and played before a total audience of 60 thousand people. Performances are being staged at different locations each time, not only in theatres, but also in such places as zoos and night-clubs. Producer and founder – Yaroslava Kravchenko. Artistic director – Maxym Holenko.

Misanthrope Theatre was founded in May 2015 by director Ilya Moshchitsky and composer Dmitry Saratsky. This theatre company includes young artists who work in different art genres: actors, dancers, directors, circus artists. The main features of Misanthrope theatre are: the ability to play with different genres and the desire to speak about the present in the language of theatre. The founders are deeply convinced that art must be free and that there is no room for compromises – neither with the audience, the state, or with themselves. „Misanthrope“ proves that theatre can be both genuinely current and contemporary. It can entertain, provoke, intrigue and enlighten at the same time. „Misanthrope“ Theater creates performances, tries to avoid nonsense, praises intelligence, suffers from allergy to stupidity, does not see sense to match any genre, format, market, expectations, quite often reaches for a bottle, dances, dies everyday, is in tears, says what it thinks, does not explain things that are unclear, proves useful, intolerable, sharp, impatient, but (!) it is also always open to a dialogue!

PostPlayTheatre – this theatre represents what can be called real underground theatre. PostPlay is the first critical theatre in Ukraine. Their projects are shining a light on society's most „uncomfortable“ or painful topics.

The most promising representatives of Ukraine's independent scene





Thus, we can see that Ukrainian theatre recently underwent some foundational shifts. It broadened the offered variety of productions and started incorporating new forms of expression by actively involving European theatre experience and by accepting new trends and tendencies from all around the world. Nevertheless, there are so many questions left unanswered, such as: questions of financial support, education of new generations, implementation of new technologies, etc. Besides, Ukraine is still in the middle of a huge political upheaval. Sanctions against Russia are being relaxed every day, which means that mass media is getting flooded by Pro-Russian propaganda once again. It is now becoming possible for Russian artists and theatres to come back to Ukraine. And this begs the question: was there enough time for Ukrainian theatre to become strong enough and persuade audiences of its value? It is only but a hope that the inferiority complex will not come back into the picture. We create the history here and now.



Kyiv Academic drama and comedy theatre on the Left bank

