

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian theatre faced ideological uncertainty and financial instability. The experimental, avant-garde theatre tradition of the 1920s was brought to an end by the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. Like many other members of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, the avant-garde theatre director Les Kurbas was killed during Stalin's Great Terror, and the tradition of philosophical and political theatre that he practiced was lost. The establishment of socialist realism as the dominant Soviet aesthetic ideology in the 1930s made it impossible for theatre beyond these ideological constraints to survive. According to the socialist realist ideologist Andrey Zhdanov, artists were called to be 'engineers of the human soul', who would portray reality 'in its revolutionary development' rather than from an objective perspective.

As a result of the enduring legacy of Soviet cultural politics, many theatres in independent, post-1991 Ukraine continued to be led by conservative directors according to a strict hierarchical structure. For this reason, several Ukrainian theatre-makers left to work in Russia, where theatres received superior financial support. Enthusiasm for the verbatim method among Ukrainian playwrights over the last 10 years is due in part to Russian influence, notably from *teatr.doc*. In turn, interest in documentary theatre in Russia was stimulated by the London-based *Royal Court Theatre*, which organized a series of workshops on the verbatim method for Russian playwrights in the 1990s. Many of these playwrights were searching for a theatrical language that would represent different cultural minorities; the verbatim method of writing a play using extracts from interviews seemed to appear as a good method to integrate minority narratives.

The Russian theatre critic Pavel Rudnev has emphasized the importance of the Russian theatre landscape for Ukrainian playwrights: "The important geopolitical status of Russian theatre is demonstrated by the fact that Ukrainian, Belarusian, Central Asian, and Caucasian theatrical and dramaturgical phenomena often achieve greater success in Russia than in their own countries, because of the comparatively weak infrastructure there¹".

Some well-known contemporary Ukrainian playwrights (such as Natalia Vorozhbyt and Maksym Kurochkin) studied at the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow and subsequently worked in the Russian capital, with their primary source of income writing scripts for soap operas. Vorozhbyt's first play *Zhitie prostykh (The Life of the Laymen)*, was staged several times in Moscow, Tolyatti, Novorossiisk and Saint Petersburg. Her plays premiered at the Russian playwriting festivals 'Liubimovka' and 'Novaia Drama' alongside works by other Ukrainian playwrights. Vorozhbyt's drama *Zernoshovyshe (The Grain Store)*, in which she describes how her grandmother's family survived the great Holodomor famine between 1932 and 1933 is suffused with memories of her grandmother.

¹Rudnev, Pavel Let's talk about faith. Theater brief from Moscow URL: http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9597%3Atheaterbrief-aus-russland-political-theater-in-russia-in-the-year-2014&catid=708%3Atheaterbriefe-aus-russland&Itemid=99

Vorozhbyt recorded interviews with her and integrated them into her play. This play was successfully staged at the *Royal Court Theatre*, and only premiered in Ukraine many years later.

Documentary Theatre

A definition of documentary theatre appeared for the first time in Ukrainian theatrical discourse in 2007. The occasion was the premiere of the verbatim play *Odinochestvo (Solitude)* by Vladimir Gorislaves in collaboration with other authors as part of the experimental program of the independent theatre festival 'Kurbalesia' in Kharkiv².

In 2012, the *Royal Court Theatre* launched a theatre project that aimed to support a new generation of Ukrainian playwrights. Elyse Dodgson, director of the international programme at the *Royal Court Theatre*, visited Ukraine and organized a series of workshops for Ukrainian and Georgian playwrights, which included coaching in verbatim techniques³.

In 2009, the Kyiv theatre festival 'Week of Contemporary Theatre' (Tyzhden' aktual'noï p'esy) was founded and continued on an annual basis. Elena Gremina and Mikhail Ugarov from the Russian *teatr.doc* led several seminars and workshops on the verbatim method, inspiring many contemporary Ukrainian playwrights in the process.

This intensive engagement with the documentary genre contributed to the emergence of the *Vsevolod Meyerhold Theatre Centre* in Kherson, which soon became a key driver of the movement. Since 2008, the director of the centre has been Mykola Homanyuk, a trained sociologist, who incorporates sociological methods such as qualitative interviews into the process of creating a documentary performance. Homanyuk launched the documentary theatre project 'Literally Democracy'. A series of qualitative interviews were adapted into theatre performances and staged. The most popular themes of these documentary performances included: political transparency, corruption in the Ukrainian university system, gender issues, homelessness, and illegal construction projects⁴. Documentary performances in this format were always followed by a discussion that Homanyuk described as a 'public hearing'. Local council members, sociologists, political scientists, lawyers and members of the local community were invited to these hearings, which were intended to facilitate civil engagement in local policy-making and the creation of a network of activists.

Between 2009 and 2010, activists from *Totem Centre for Youth Initiatives* in Kherson and the *Meyerhold Centre* launched the project 'Generation Dialogue'. As part of the project, dozens of eyewitnesses to the Second World War were interviewed. Among them were partisans, forced labourers

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⁴ Interview with Gomenyuk on 23 April 2014.

and those who had survived the war as children⁵. These interviews formed the basis of two verbatim performances: *Ia pomniu, kak Lenin umer* (*I remember how Lenin died*) and *Kacheli* (*Swings*).

In 2012, the Ukrainian writer Kateryna Babkina founded the theatre festival 'Document'. She had become fascinated by the German theatre group *Rimini Protokoll*, and decided to invite them to Ukraine. The first edition of 'Document' took place in December 2012 in Kyiv. Rimini Protokoll were unable to raise the money to showcase their productions live, so they played video recordings of some their performances, and Daniel Wetzel led a two-day workshop. The second edition of 'Document' aimed to bring together different theatre productions from all over Ukraine. One of the most-discussed performances of the festival was Sashko Brama's *Dyplom* (*Diploma*), which criticized the corrupt educational system. The performance was based on interviews with students who described their experience of giving bribes or being humiliated by university teachers.

A new wave of documentary theatre formats emerged with the Euromaidan revolution and the outbreak of the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Before the Euromaidan revolution of 2014, Ukrainian theatres were still beset by inferiority complexes – a result of the long-term policies of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, which centralized theatrical production in Moscow. This changed drastically in the wake of Euromaidan and the outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine. Many Ukrainian playwrights have ceased collaborating creatively with their Russian counterparts and begun to write exclusively in Ukrainian. Maksym Kurochkin, who until 2014 worked predominantly in Russia, describes in an interview with Jack Clover a turning point that convinced him to refuse any further professional collaboration with Russia:

I have always considered myself a Ukrainian writer. [...] After the start of the war, there were no longer any other options. Crudely speaking, I now don't want to have anything to do with Russian playwriting. If before it was possible to half turn a blind eye if your name was written with a slash, as some kind of Ukrainian/Russian author, since the winter of 2013 it is absolutely not. I'm so imperfect, but I have no alternative. I am a Ukrainian author and that is forever. Any other description of me is insulting. It has now been accepted that the Russian language is a weapon. The Ukrainian language, since the time of the Russian empire, has suffered 160 direct prohibitions. In reality, it was many more. I myself am a product of this process. Please understand that this is extremely painful. It's very painful that I wasted such a vast amount of time being part of this process of Russification. It's a guilt that will always be with me. [...] Now there isn't even the tiniest excuse to have a conversation which says that language isn't guilty. It's not possible. Those who talk about the fair competition between the languages of Great Russian culture . . . this is a continuation of direct aggression, because the forces are not evenly balanced and one of them for a long time was trying to destroy the other. A child cannot compete with a bodybuilder who for many years has been pumping himself full of steroids.⁶

⁵ Гоманюк Н.А. Украинский верbatim-театр: опыт взаимодействия театрального искусства и социальных наук / Н.А.Гоманюк // Ученые записки Таврического национального университета им. В.И.Вернадского. – 2012. – Том 25 (64). №4. – С. 141-147

⁶ Clover, Jack. "A new 'dawn' in Ukrainian theatre: A conversation with Maksym Kurochkin (April 2019)." *New Drama in Russian: Performance, Politics and Protest in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*. Ed. J. A. E. Curtis. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 151–162.

The Witness Enters the Stage

With the Euromaidan revolution and the outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine, the so-called theatre of witness became a widespread phenomenon in Ukrainian theatre practice.

Public readings of Natalia Vorozhbyt's *Maidan Diaries* were first theatre performances to deal directly with the recent events of Euromaidan, engaging Maidan activists as witnesses together with professional actors (who had also been Maidan activists themselves). Natalia Vorozhbyt and director Andriy Mai spent three months on Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti talking to a wide range of people from students and cossacks to doctors and volunteers, gathering their testimonies to create a verbatim play based on around 80 hours of interviews. In December 2014, Vorozhbyt and Mai, along with several colleagues, began meeting a few times a week to exchange their thoughts and feelings about the events unfolding on Maidan.

The artistic collective PicPic, devised by authors Dmytro Levytsky and Piotr Armianovski, developed another interesting participatory project about Euromaidan in 2017, the Maidan audio-walk. Participants in the audio-walk were guided by a voice from their smartphone through the main protest area, where information and stories relating to the key events of the demonstrations were recounted. The audio-walk was based on a narrative by Maria Berlinska, who had actively participated in the Maidan protests. After the Maidan audio-walk, PicPic went on to develop *The Case of Mendel Beylis*, inspired by the audio-walk formats of Rimini Protokoll. Levytsky had consulted with Daniel Wetzel of Rimini Protokoll while working on his first project.

One of the most interesting and innovative discursive theatre projects that appeared during the revolutionary moment is the documentary performance *Expertyza (Expertise)* by Kyiv-based performance group *TanzLaboratorium (TL)*. The project was inspired by *Rimini Protokoll* workshops in 2013 and borrowed the game structure that had been pioneered by Daniel Wetzel. In so doing, TL opened up a forum for engaged discussion on crucial political issues that helped to restore broken channels of communication between different sides of the conflict.

One of the key actors in the Ukrainian documentary theatre scene after Maidan was the *Theatre of Displaced*, which concentrated exclusively on witness theatre. This theatre was founded in 2015 by German director George Genoux, who had previously worked in Russia with *teatr.doc* and the *Joseph Beuys Theatre*, and Ukrainian playwright Natalia Vorozhbyt, and was supported financially by the German embassy in Ukraine. The actors of the *Theatre of Displaced* were themselves internally displaced persons reflecting on their traumatic experiences of war, including being held in captivity and surviving heavy shelling. The theatre became a place of integration, empowerment and rehabilitation for the internally displaced and soldiers who participated in the initial Ukrainian ATO operation. Genoux argued that bearing witness to the personal crises connected with political upheaval (such as displacement or the psychological problems of resocialisation after serving on the front line) on stage helped IDPs to heal their wounds, overcome the period of crisis and reintegrate into society.

The *Theatre of Displaced* began with the play *Where is the East?*, which gave a platform to multiple voices of internally displaced people from Luhansk and Donetsk. Genoux wanted to build a kind of community for displaced people based in a small studio on the site of the Oleksandr Dovzhenko film studios in Kyiv. The theatre also employed a psychologist, who helped the actors to work through their trauma and empower themselves through acting and community-building.

In 2015-2016 in Ukraine, some theatres and many NGOs (in particular *Theatre for Dialogue*, which worked with Augusto Boal's concept of theatre of the oppressed), developed performances in collaboration with internally displaced people. The documentary musical *A Pie of Parallel Reality* by director Vladimir Gorislavets premiered in Kharkiv in 2016 and wove together the personal testimonies of displaced people from Donetsk, Luhansk and Crimea with songs composed by displaced people. The performance bore witness to emotional and painful stories of displacement: memories of the bombardment of witnesses' home towns, the experience of a young soldier who had just returned from the front line, the testimony of a journalist who described Russian propaganda and manipulation strategies during the annexation of Crimea, critical voices about increasing nationalism after Maidan. Diverse stories collided in this performance, creating a polyphonic tapestry of human grief about the recent past and hope for a better future.

Another interesting case study concerns the witness performance *I Am A Veteran*, organised by the NGO *Pobratymy* and supported by the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The aim of the project was to direct the attention of a wider audience towards the wartime experiences of veteran soldiers and to overcome the negative stereotypes around them. The organisers wanted to demonstrate the ongoing problem of social rehabilitation for veteran soldiers and motivate other NGOs to support initiatives for the social and physical rehabilitation of veterans.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iR71Yxhzvb4&t=4811s> - *I Am A Veteran*

Ten veterans performed monologues about being wounded, their medical treatment, daily life in a warzone, experiencing depression after returning to civilian life, and imprisonment at the hands of separatists, among other things. Their stories were accompanied by the military orchestra of the Ukrainian armed forces. The performance took place on a large open air stage constructed in front of the Foreign Ministry of Ukraine in October 2016. The organisers hired professional playwright Natalia Vorozhbyt who helped to structure the veterans' monologues. The monologues were also subtitled in English so that the foreign ambassadors who had been invited to attend, some of whom facilitated medical treatment for wounded soldiers, could better understand the soldiers' stories.

Documentary and witness theatre practice still play a marginal role in the repertoire of theatrical institutions in Ukraine. This is partly due to the precarious working conditions faced by those who organize and participate in such projects.

Theatre Pedagogy Projects

The Theatre of Displaced has not staged any performances during the last three years, but, since 2019, Georg Genoux has been working with teenagers in Bakhmut, Popasna and Nikolaievka on a theatre project entitled [Misto z soboiu](#) (*Takeaway Town*), which allows teenagers to develop plays portraying their everyday life in these three towns in eastern Ukraine. Genoux has stated that this project aims to help teenagers to overcome the traumas of war by sharing their stories and observations with a wider audience. Guest performances of the plays have been shown in Berlin, Potsdam and Vienna, as well as in some venues in eastern Ukraine.

A similar project entitled *Vidlik (Countdown)* is the initiative of young director Evgenia Vedisheva, who worked on a voluntary basis with no institutional support with teenagers from towns in eastern Ukraine that were damaged amid the hostilities, and created witness performances together with them.

Theatre pedagogy is a fairly new term in the Ukrainian context. Since the days of the Soviet Union, ‘gurtky’ (cultural clubs) at schools and cultural centres for young people have been a Ukrainian tradition. Amateur theatre and school theatre is often considered inferior and receives limited support, with most school theatres opting to work with scripts from the conventional dramatic canon. The theatre programme of the Kyiv Municipal Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre for Children and Youth has remained unchanged for decades. The theatre’s educational programme is limited to short lectures before the beginning of performances, during which a lecturer comes onstage and explains the plot of a musical or ballet. In February 2017, I was invited by the director of the theatre to lead musical education workshops for children and teenagers based on Puccini’s opera *La Bohème*. The director was eager to organise similar workshops on a regular basis and to open an educational department at the theatre. Through connections made during a previous internship at the Cologne Opera House, I was able to plan a cultural exchange between the Kyiv Municipal Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre and the Cologne Opera, but sadly the programme was unable to go ahead due to the reluctance of the theatre manager of the Kyiv Municipal Theatre, who was only willing to offer the educational projects on a commercial basis.

One of the most recent theatre pedagogy projects, which aimed to bring together teenagers from eastern and western Ukraine was ClassAct, a Scottish initiative that was adapted for the Ukrainian context between 2016 and 2018. Teenagers from one city in the West and one city in the East that had borne the brunt of the conflict were paired together under the supervision of Ukrainian playwrights. Together, they wrote plays that were then staged by professional directors and performed by professional actors on stage. A central aim of this project was to dispel stereotypes about western and eastern Ukraine that remain etched in the public consciousness, not least because of the ongoing war. The project ran into some difficulties, including the tendency of the professional actors to act in an exaggerated, affected manner, thus misinterpreting the teenagers’ plays.

A similar project called the *Teenage Dramaturgy Laboratory* was launched at the *First Ukrainian Theatre for Children and Youth* in Lviv. Teenagers developed their own plays under the supervision of professional playwrights Iryna Harets and Andriy Bondarenko. These plays were then staged by professional directors.

The marked conservatism of Ukrainian state theatres may be rooted in the old-fashioned educational system. There are no faculties dedicated to theatrical pedagogy, documentary theatre or applied theatre at any Ukrainian universities, although the Faculty of Culture and Art at the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv offers a programme that features postcolonial theatre studies. Students can choose a module in ‘Theory and Practice of Contemporary Theatre’, in which the work of Romeo Castellucci, Thomas Ostermeier, Krystian Lupa, Krzysztof Warlikowski, Pina Bausch, Sascha Waltz, Jacques Lecoq, Robert Wilson, Tadeusz Kantor, and other famous theatre-makers is analyzed. Another course entitled ‘Integrative Theatre’ covers topics such as drama therapy, interactive and socially-engaged theatre, and documentary theatre. The Ukrainian theatre scholar Uliana Roy, who completed her postgraduate studies in theatrical pedagogy at the University of Warsaw, currently teaches a course in theatrical pedagogy for actors and theatre researchers to students in their fourth year of studies at the University of Lviv. Roy’s theoretical course has been running for three years thus far and consists of a series of up to 16 lectures and seminars. In general, theatre pedagogy is taught to actors who are pursuing a professional career in theatre, and theatre researchers who study theatre from a theoretical point of view.

Anastasia Toros has taught a module in ‘Drama in Education’ for students of social pedagogy at the Catholic University of Ukraine. This university, located in Lviv, is known for its progressive approach, which renders it an outlier within the Ukrainian educational system.

Over the last few years, terms such as ‘integrative theatre’ (denoting theatre projects aimed at including people with learning disabilities), ‘immersive theatre’ and ‘post-documentary theatre’ have appeared in the Ukrainian context. The term ‘post-documentary’ was introduced by theatre critic Anastasia Haishenetz to describe theatre projects that combine fiction and fact (quotations from interviews, biographical information etc.) One post-documentary performance entitled *H-Effect* by Roza Sarkisian and Joanna Wichowska integrated the stories of soldiers, military volunteers and displaced people into the plot of Heiner Müller’s *Hamletmaschine*, while playwright Tetiana Kicenکو wrote a script based on interviews with women who were sentenced to life in prison, interwoven with the opera *Penita*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueNIqemBc2Y> – H Effect

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uw-0h72nI0E> – PenitaOpera

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