

The article examines the impact of social networks on modern theatre by looking at the case of drama transformation. Discussed are the peculiarities of reportage plays versus traditional plays, emphasising the various forms of so-called Facebook plays. The author shows that while Facebook plays have become a major feature of theatrical life in the 21st century, their proliferation has also revealed social networks' negative effects on social communication. This has found its apt reflection in dramatic texts. The study concludes with an argument that although the impact of social networks on drama has of late tended to wane, the changes that have occurred in the structure of texts over the last decade or so appear to be largely irreversible.

Keywords: Facebook, plot decomposition, confession, non-communication

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The 21st-Century Drama and the New Reality of Social Networks

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Introduction

The dominant role of social networks is commonly recognised these days as a major factor in human life. The kind of impact the networks have in most areas of our existence, from trade to politics, cannot be denied or undone. For example, one explanation for why thousands of people could get together so quickly and efficiently in a downtown square of the Ukrainian capital during the 2014 revolution is related to the SMS phenomenon. Text messages were sent out by those already present on this square to their relatives, friends and acquaintances. Despite the shutdown of public transport and blocked entrances to the capital, new flows of protesters continued to arrive. Their SMSes served as a kind of SOS signal and seemed to work almost flawlessly.

Another example – and unlike the first, even backed up by sociological research – is the considerable role that Facebook played in Ukraine during the 2019 election when the current Ukrainian government scored a stunning landslide victory in the race. Obviously, by the mid-2010s, texts from social networks, or what preceded them, gained magical power over the addressee and were able to stimulate complex social and political processes.

With social networks having become an inseparable, prominent feature of our lives these days, we feel their impact in practically every area, and theatre and drama are no exception. It is hardly possible now to establish who was the first to react to the phenomenon of social networks – theatre or drama? However, today, artistic adaptations of Facebook and other social media techniques are evident practically everywhere. Over the last two decades, the acceptance of social networks by the European drama has occurred at both the thematic and structural levels.

New as Forgotten Old

What we call new very often happens to be something that is just well-forgotten old. This banal observation must at least be accurate when using the experience of social

networks in drama and theatre. After all, creating plays and performances outside the literary tradition, outside the rules, without relying on the theory of drama, is a distinctive feature of the avant-garde theatre of the 1920s. This is especially evident in the activities of the so-called Left Front of Art (LEF), an influential artistic association created by legendary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in which reportage, a stream of life impressions, was considered the basis of a dramatic text.

One of the LEF's key postulates was the recognition of the alleged supremacy of the "literature of fact" over the literature of fiction. Fiction as such was declared untenable, a kind of "payment in counterfeit coins on the bills of reality". Given that newspaper reports, chronicles and eyewitness accounts were considered the primary donor to the "literature of fact", all this leads us to compare avant-garde pieces with the texts of verbatim and doc. theatre and the theatre of witnesses from the last third of the 20th and the early 21st centuries. It is also noteworthy that, according to the influential LEF theorists Viktor Shklovsky and Osip Brik, the documentary or reportage nature of the texts conditioned the existence of such phenomena as "plot-lessness" and "plot decomposition". Thus, Brik wrote the following:

Instead of plays that unfold psychological conflicts, instead of plot-based dramas, dramatisations appear on the stage more and more often, taking the form of reviews. Instead of a cohesiveness of action, a cohesiveness of intrigue, we have a sequence of separate scenes, often almost unrelated to each other. The central characters turn into observers who connect these separate scenes, and the viewer's interest is not focused on them ("The Plot Decomposition" 226).

Playwright Sergei Tretyakov (1892–1937) became one of the most active and consistent proponents of the notion of creating plays as the "literature of fact". A close acquaintance of the avant-garde directors Igor Terentiev, Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Meyerhold, he developed his own methodology for creating texts and focused on the practical implementation of ideas related to the "literature of fact". Like other LEF members, Tretyakov believed that the main starting point for creating plays of a new type should be a newspaper chronicle, a report or a journalistic note, that is, everything that is written "right there on the spot", as it were. According to Tretyakov, a documentary fact or a newspaper report ensured what he referred to as the utility of art. The momentary, short-lived information was to be processed with minimal time and effort spent, while the facts themselves were to be assembled under the thematic rather than plot principle.

Using this cliché, Tretyakov wrote his play *Gas Masks*, based on a newspaper report about an accident at the Ural Gas Plant. Its première, as directed by Sergei Eisenstein, took place in February 1924 in the workshop of a gas plant in Moscow. Among Tretyakov's other works of the same type is a libretto of the political show *Do you*

hear, Moscow!, staged by Eisenstein, and a nine-part “event” eloquently called *Roar China!*. Quite tellingly, the latter show was built on actual developments the author had himself collected while in China in 1920. Vasilij Fedorov staged it at the Meyerhold Theatre in 1926.

A Product of Social Networks

Unlike documentary plays – which are so visibly present in the theatrical process since around the last decade of the 20th century – the idea of “plot decomposition” has remained unclaimed for quite a long time. It began to be actively used again only with the advent of Facebook plays of the reportage type. Among playwrights with experience in documentary theatre, the magic of text coming from Facebook has been quickly perceived as a signal to master a new dramatic technique: they would collect Facebook texts and compile something like a doc. drama from them.

The result was a product created according to the principle of a message feed around events to which the characters react. The respective texts, hereafter referred to as Facebook plays, were invariably constructed on reports or testimonies taken from a social network – rather than newspapers, as was the case in the 1920s – but, as before, with almost no plot to adhere to, e.g., on a thematic basis. While such Facebook plays can be found in the drama of many European countries, we focus our attention on the Ukrainian experience.

The emergence of the first Facebook plays in Ukraine is associated with the 2014 events best known as the Maidan Revolution. The link here is plain to see because social networks brought the freshest and most concerning information about those events prompting people to join the protests. This is, for example, how the play *The Diary of Maidan* was born by its author Natalya Vorozhbit, perhaps the most famous of all modern Ukrainian playwrights active on the scene. The work on the play, done within the framework of the documentary project, Rapid Response Theatre, commenced literally right after the capital Kyiv registered the very first clash between the protesters and the police. At that point, Vorozhbit and director Andrey May quickly initiated a collection of documentary material and eyewitness accounts.

As the main artistic and social tasks for the future play and performance were to recreate the atmosphere of the events unfolding at the Independence Square (Maidan), the authors needed to hear and present the voices of those participating in the events. Ultimately, what emerged from hearing such voices (through interviews and Facebook posts) was a graphic, highly emotional narrative, the dramatic construction of which

was based on the chronology of events. This was the chronology of bloodshed, beatings and deaths, and it became the main plot of *The Diary of Maidan*, a product compiled entirely from the collected micro-stories.

Apart from lacking a plot in the traditional sense, *The Diary of Maidan* had no principal hero or heroine among its characters. The play, staged at the Ivan Franko National Theatre in Kyiv and directed by Andrey May, featured six equally male and female actors. They each emerged from the crowd, told their micro-story and then disappeared. This principle of multiple heroes who are “dissolved” in the events has become key for other reportage plays about the Maidan Revolution.

The Diary of Maidan was also shown at several international theatre festivals. However, the focus of attention there was drawn to the subject matter of performance. Rather than the technique of creating a dramatic text, the latter basically represented a compilation of Facebook posts from various Maidan protesters. Those posts became their “direct” speech in the performance (Korzeniowska-Bihun “Kilka słów” 10).

A few more similar plays, plot-less but united by topical themes, appeared in the years after the Maidan Revolution. The most typical of these were *We, Maidan* by Nadiya Symchych and a “street mystery” called *Maidan Inferno, or On the Other Side of Hell* by Neda Nezhdana. With both plays created by using documentary sources, the function of the text here was therefore also delegated to Facebook posts.

In her play, *We, Maidan*, Symchych collected activists’ testimonies from social networks of the period (dating to the 2014 winter), so her characters spoke with the voices of actual Maidan participants: they were students, journalists, doctors, priests, volunteers and other ordinary citizens. Born from such dramatic material was a highly ascetic performance to be shown at a Kyiv theatre called Koleso (Wheel). On a small stage, in proximity to the viewer and surrounded by items associated with Maidan – a barrel, burnt tyres, gas masks, shields and helmets – the actors voiced testimonies from Facebook.

In *Maidan Inferno*, there are two groups of characters: some are personified characters, such as a climber, a student, a security guard, a nurse, a musician, a journalist and a seminarian, while others are a Facebook chorus of voices. The real actions of the former are conditioned by the latter. Before each new scene with the main characters, a choir of masked Facebook participants arises, uttering anonymous monologues from the social networks. That way, by assigning to the Facebook choir the function of a commentator on the unfolding events, the play’s author illustrates the impact the social messaging must have had on the protesters’ decision-making.

Facebook Plays as Intimate Confessions

In addition to Facebook plays of the reportage type – where the main thing for the playwright is to collect peoples' responses and information on a specific topic – the social network prompted the appearance of dramatic texts constructed on the principle of one person's messages on their Facebook feed. Stories about oneself, one's family, psychological problems and intimate experiences – in a word, confessions that were incognito-published on the network became a source of inspiration for authors of this type of Facebook plays. As a rule, such plays are associated with acute traumatic experiences, which, thanks to a confessional technique taken from Facebook, maximise the intimacy of the issue.

Content-wise, there seem to be two main ways or approaches for playwrights to use the Facebook material and, on its basis, build a dramatic text. The first approach arises from the situation when there is a domination of a specific social or political issue that filters, as it were, through the characters. One such issue that proves particularly acute to Ukraine is the war in the east, in Donbas, a theme indescribably painful to so many local people. The war makes our characters take off and leave their homes, part with their loved ones, and learn to adjust to or almost grow into a new reality.

The best examples of this approach are the plays *Vitalik-Ulysses* by Vitaly Chensky and *Mother Not According to Gorky* by Lena Lyagushonkova, both writers themselves hailing from Donbas. Chensky is a native of the city of Mariupol on the Sea of Azov, from where he left for the capital Kyiv sometime before the war. And Lena Lyagushonkova is originally from Lugansk, having fled from this city after it came under the control of the Russia-backed separatists. Both began their dramatic careers in 2017 and have recently become repertoire writers and in-demand screenwriters.

Chensky's play, a sarcastic story about a guy from provincial Mariupol who moved to Kyiv, was composed as a dialogue with himself. The hero kind of splits here into two characters, each of which embodies a certain hypostasis of the author, in fact, Vitaly Chensky himself. In various guises, he tries to arrange his life in different ways and reacts differently to political events as he reveals them on Facebook. Two characters act as two nicknames of one hero, who, hiding behind different Facebook names, writes about his impressions in a foreign city and the political events that he neither understands nor accepts.

As a result, in the play directed by Maksym Holenko, we can see the interaction of two performers (Veselovska "Dead and Alive" 161). These are deeply individual characters, both recognisable as typical representatives of the 2010s generation. The young Ukrainians in question have yet to define who they are and tend to aggressively reject everything imposed on them by their parents and the school, the establishment and

politicians. There was a special Facebook hero with several nicknames, multiplying himself depending on the situation and the social circle.

Lyagushonkova's play is a dramatic saga about her post-Soviet childhood years in Luhansk, where she still has many living relatives. The very title of the play, *Mother Not According to Gorky*, contains irony and sarcasm directed against Maxim Gorky, the pillar of Soviet drama, whose works were considered exemplary from the perspective of social issues. Therefore, the mother in Lyagushonkova's play is an anti-heroine. Her main features are inertia and complaisance since this woman, much like the playwright's real mother, is not capable of decisive actions in order to break out of the wretched backwater.

This play comprises a series of Lyagushonkova's own Facebook posts filled with expressed indignation. In the posts, she reacts to the recklessness of her relatives, their dependence on Soviet stereotypes and their habits of living miserably and acting on the orders from above. Lyagushonkova wrote the play as a story in the first-person singular. However, the reception of Facebook posts allowed Lyagushonkova to distance herself from the events that had taken place in her family.

Her Facebook posts look like random notes of a gradually maturing teenager and are not logically connected by a series of events. At the same time, the process of growing up and understanding who you and others are – as presented through Facebook revelations – makes it possible to keep the chronology. Here are the scattered reactions of a girl who, with every move, gains more and more of that understanding and, in the end, knows a lot more about herself and the world than the adults around her. In a sense, such reactions provide a three-dimensional picture of the degradation of an individual family and the entire industrial region.

Other plays that used the Facebook resource and design were created outside of direct connection with political events. For example, the starting point for two playwrights who created a composition called *Othello/ Facebook*, Pavlo Arje and Maryna Smilyanets, was – in addition to the Facebook principle – an assertion that there had been a particular collective author hiding under the name of William Shakespeare. In working on the dramaturgical basis of *Othello/ Facebook* together with the actors of the Golden Gate Theatre, the playwrights acted as compilers of other people's messages. The composition consisted of Facebook texts from actors-participants in the play who were actually representing themselves on stage.

In this case, Shakespeare's masterpiece was used only as an impulse for performers to recall and tell the audience about some annoying moments from their own life, the moments that stimulated them to take decisive actions, good or bad. The real episodes that they recalled and then talked about on social networks were associated with one

of the concepts behind the original *Othello* play – a feeling of being undeservedly hurt and the envy towards a more successful rival. Everyone was choosing something of their own: a story about the death of a father who did not pay attention to his son, participating in a provincial beauty contest or the first student party.

Apparently made with a high degree of sincerity, the actors' recollection of their intimate monologues demonstrates the pain, wretchedness and, ultimately, the insignificance of all those grievances that had tormented them for years. What was a serious psychological problem for them is now overcome during the game. Indeed, here in *Othello/ Facebook*, each of the actors represents both themselves and their attitude to one's own suffering, which he or she caricatures.

The *Othello/ Facebook* staged by director Stas Zhyrkov at the Golden Gate Theatre is compositionally and visually similar to a social network page. For the viewer to understand that all this is happening in the world of Facebook, the actors are constantly changing their masks. It is as if they exist in many faces and are imperceptible, hiding behind all sorts of masking nicknames but suddenly popping up with their revelations. Then, even more suddenly, they "drop out" of their roles as if to suggest that the audience should perceive the theatre as a different system of coordinates, something where the images are illusory and real at the same time – almost like in social networks.

The success of *Othello/ Facebook* inspired playwright Pavlo Arje and director Stas Zhyrkov to create another play based on posts from the social network. This time around, they chose to focus, as in reportage plays, on a single topical issue – school bullying, which became a plot-formative theme for the play *Class* staged in Kyiv at the Left Bank Theatre. However, unlike *Othello/ Facebook*, where each of the actors extracted a personal story related to resentment, envy or jealousy from his or her Facebook, here the future performers were asked to initiate a Facebook flash mob.

In preparing for the performance, the actors needed to describe on Facebook a documentary story about bullying in school. The story that sounded particularly colourful and persuasive was selected to be the main plot, while the actress telling it assumed the role of the main character in the performance. Such in-depth attention to a specific fate contrasted with the constant flickering of scattered real-life episodes in *Othello/ Facebook* and, as a result, made *Class* effectively the venue for a serious and profound discussion of the school bullying issue.

Thanks to what became a highly personal account and essentially a study into the pupils' relationships with parents and teachers in one randomly selected class, the authors foregrounded the issue of school conservatism in general. As the play aptly showed, bullying, like any other form of violence, remains unpunished wherever the society fails

to address the problem continuing instead to stick to obsolete clichés and outdated rules. In order to point to all of this, various elements, objects and symbols of the typical school reality filled in the scene during the innovative performance: a shabby carpet, a traditional solemn line-up of pupils with the participation of invited politicians and other influential guests, a banal full-of-pathos speech by the headmaster.

Viber-Tinder Plays and Social Non-Communication

The so widely spread and highly collective “revitalisation” of Facebook on stage is a remarkably indicative social development. Crucially, it seems to demonstrate how spontaneous personal emotions that overwhelm social networks have begun to rule society as a whole and how they have become such a dominant force and pushed many of its users towards social aggression. Moreover, in that way, all the collected personal mini-stories become an occasion to talk not only about the hidden and explicit psychological problems of an individual but also about the issue of manipulation in social networks. As a phenomenon of overwhelming real human communication, social networks have become a subject matter in dramatic texts.

A good example of this can be traced in the next two plays, where events unfold around such social networks as Viber and Tinder. The works in question, *Gorka* (Hill) by Russian playwright Alexei Zhitkovsky and *Tinderland* by Irina Serebryakova from Ukraine, are quite traditional in form. Each of the two plays is based on everyday stories about problems that arise from the unsettled personal lives and invariably complicated intimate experiences of the main characters. In both, there are shiny, bright-looking heroines of decidedly action type who happen to find themselves in various conflict situations, which is a fairly common theme for the “good-old” traditional drama. And all that distinguishes these plays from the texts of the previous generation is the actors’ active involvement in the mentioned social networks, with the help of which they try to solve their personal and career problems.

Because the heroine of *Gorka*, a young woman named Nastya, works in a kindergarten and is forced to communicate constantly via Viber with the parents of her children, the author abundantly saturates the text with quotes from her correspondence on the network. The endless stream of messages keeps Nastya in constant tension, but no one comments on them in any way. It is simply reproduced as a visual aid of how emotional phrases tend to replace real feelings and actions and how online manipulations lead people to overlook objective facts and believe fakes instead.

By capturing the heroine's obvious dependence on correspondence in *Viber*, the playwright thereby diagnoses not only the influence of the social network but also suggests that the creation of various groups on the network deprives their participants of normal communication and frank discussions. Moreover, as he weaves *Viber* messages into the plot, Zhitkovsky seems to point out that social networks are often used as a mechanism for intimidation, surveillance, suppression of will, and psychological assault.

In creating her *Tinderland*, Serebryakova clearly opted to use screenshots from her friends' smartphones registered on the *Tinder* network. The play's heroine here is a girl who naively hopes to arrange her personal life through *Tinder*. However, in the process of dating, she constantly encounters fictitious names and invented biographies, lies that remain absolutely unpunished, and a desire to take advantage of the gullibility of others. As a result, the network that the heroine and her friends have become so infatuated with turns out to be hugely dangerous territory, full of hypocrisy and deceit, where connections are destroyed rather than created.

Nevertheless, at the end of the day, both *Gorka* and *Tinderland* conclude on a high note, as the real life depicted there does win over the phantom world of social networks. The networks' imaginary power is undermined by stalemate life situations, such as a loss of the loved one or a dangerous illness. That way, the authors break, as it were, the magic circle of characters' dependence on social networks and insist on their primary communicative functions.

Conclusion

It appears as though the principle of Facebook posts as a means to build dramatic material has all but exhausted itself by now. At first, when giving preference to documentary plays based on Facebook messages, the playwrights must have reasonably considered that this was an interesting new way to objectively convey the atmosphere of real events and public moods. But what seems to have happened next was that Facebook plays fell victim to the social networks' transformation from a communicator into a kind of platform for public confessions.

At that, the nature of Facebook revelations prompted the creation of texts where those confessions would become increasingly infectious and "collective", with multiplying characters hiding under various nicknames. So much so that eventually, the same playwrights began to uncover and highlight issues that were often caused by none other than social networks themselves. What had initially helped them better

understand and reveal their personality became, over time, a tool for manipulation, if not an exercise in social non-communication.

Even so, such a radical change of form in drama has made its mark – it has led to the emergence of a substantially new hero on stage while transforming the nature of characters' communication amongst themselves and modifying the dialogue structure of drama. The latter features have proved surprisingly resilient, as they did not disappear with the loss of interest in Facebook. What takes place as a result is an effective, highly productive exchange between the social reality and the artistic reality of drama, something that has already been serving as a significant focus of attention to drama theorists (Semiotics of Drama and Theatre).

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