

# SOCIAL THEATER IN THE CRISIS TIME IN UKRAINE: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE (ON THE BASIS OF DATA FROM KHARKIV)

**Yuliya Soroka, Anna Savchenko**

*Yuliya Soroka, Department of Sociology, N. V. Karazin Kharkiv National University.  
Address for correspondence: Kharkiv National University, pl. Svobody, 6, Kharkiv,  
61022, Ukraine. yuliya.soroka@karazin.ua.*

*Anna Savchenko, comic improv show Potishne Sho. Address for correspond-  
ence: Kharkiv National University, pl. Svobody, 6, Kharkiv, 61022, Ukraine.  
1anna.savchenko@gmail.com.*

A variety of interactive theater techniques is widely used in work with marginalized groups, in social work, social pedagogy, and psychotherapy. The crisis in Ukraine, spawned by the abuse of power that led to the Euromaidan protests, the annexation of the Crimea, and military operations in Donbas, contributed to the growing popularity of social theater as a form of social activism. Social theater is characterized by the direct connection between a creative product and real-life events, the involvement of amateur performers, creation of plays based on the testimonies of real people, encouragement of the audience participation in the performance, financial independence, and the non-profit status. Social theater is conceptualized through the distinction with traditional theater and identified with documentary drama. Unlike political theater, which focuses on criticizing the political system, social theater focuses on social contradictions and inequalities. This also distinguishes social theater from art therapy, where an individual is the object of influence. In sociology social theater is viewed from the perspective of social transformations. To analyze such processes of social transformation at the micro level, the article uses the concepts of emancipation and empowerment. The empirical basis of the article consists of interviews with participants of the forum theater and playback theater, conducted in Kharkiv in 2018. Kharkiv's borders with both the Russian Federation and the territories that are not controlled by the Ukrainian government make it unique compared to other Ukrainian cities where social theater groups operate. In 2014 Kharkiv managed to avoid the fate of Donetsk and Luhans'k, which were occupied by separatists. In contrast to the complex structure of the local frontier identity, Kharkiv authorities traditionally attempt to impose strict control on public space, suppressing alternative views. The data presented in this article addresses the following questions: what topics performances of social theater in Kharkiv covered during the period under study, how individual transformations of participants take place in the emancipatory space of social theater, and how the distinctive features of social theater turn it into a place of empowerment.

**Keywords:** Social Theater; Forum Theater; Playback; Verbatim; Emancipation; Empowerment

The events of 2013–2014 in Ukraine—the Euromaidan protests, the annexation of the Crimea, and the beginning of military operations in Donbas—foregrounded various forms of civic activism of the citizens. Notably, theatrical practices that are used in the work with vulnerable groups became more popular. Different social theater projects endeavored to create a safe space for dialogue and self-expression using theater practices.

In this article we understand social theater as a form of civic activism utilizing certain theatrical forms and practices, especially nonconventional ones, such as the theater of the oppressed (forum theater and legislative theater<sup>1</sup>), documentary theater (including verbatim<sup>2</sup>), and playback.<sup>3</sup> Social theater is characterized by the direct connection between a creative product (play, performance, show) and real-life events, the involvement of amateur performers, creation of plays based on the testimonies of real people, encouragement of the audience participation in the performance, financial independence, and the nonprofit status. As previous publications demonstrate, such theatrical practices (forum theater, verbatim or documentary theater, and playback) can be found in many Ukrainian cities: Kyiv, L'viv, Kherson, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhya, Dnipro, Cherkasy, Odesa, and Vinnytsya, among others. Some of these practices received recognition both locally and internationally. For example, “Mykolaivka” performance by the Kyiv-based Theater of the Displaced People about teenagers who survived the armed hostilities in Mykolaivka (Donetsk region) in July 2014 inspired the documentary film *School #3* (directed by Ielizaveta Smith and Georg Genoux) that won the Grand Prix in the Generation 14plus competition at the 2017 Berlinale.

We conceptualize these theater practices as examples of social theater. Social theater appeared in the 1970s in the context of the intensification of social contradictions and inequalities, and its active rise to popularity in the 1980s and 1990s is attributed to social crises, revolutions, changes in the social order, wars, and rapid

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<sup>1</sup> Forum theater and legislative theater derive from Augusto Boal's (1993) theater of the oppressed. The creation and production of plays happen here in three consecutive steps: First, a group of people working on a play discusses problems relevant to them. The discussion is facilitated by the so-called joker. During the discussion participants share their individual experiences and stories. Some of these stories are chosen for future play. Then, the chosen situations are reconstructed using a variety of artistic means. Finally, participants look for possible solutions to the problem.

<sup>2</sup> Verbatim involves the direct use on stage of previously recorded informants' words, without any interventions by a playwright or director. As a result, the performance retains a lot of informal speech (repetitions, slips of the tongue, mistakes, swear words) and can be considered more genuine (Homanyuk 2012a).

<sup>3</sup> Playback theater works with improvisation: stories recounted by the spectators are staged by the actors (Fox and Dauber 1999). Often, it is unclear where the stage is, so both physical and psychological distance between actors and audience is minimized. Here, the “conductor” leads the performance and monitors the adherence to the structure of the playback theater and its principles of interaction. The conductor offers an audience member to recount a personal story that had a significant emotional impact on the storyteller. After the story is finished, the conductor invites actors to perform it. Usually, afterward the storyteller provides some feedback, and the next volunteer can tell their story.

socioeconomic changes (Juvan 2016; Khattab 2015; Kostenko and Tiahlo 2017a; Prokhorova and Shamina 2014). According to the most popular definition, social theater “may be defined as theatre with specific social agendas; theatre where esthetics is not the ruling objective; theatre outside the realm of commerce, which drives Broadway/the West End, and the cult of the new, which dominates the avantgarde. Social theatre takes place in diverse locations—from prisons, refugee camps, and hospitals to schools, orphanages, and homes for the elderly” (Thompson and Schechner 2004:12).

For the purposes of this article it is important to differentiate between social and political theater. The latter emphasizes the political nature of theater as an object and subject of politics (Juvan 2016), combines various forms of the avant-garde, the Brechtian tradition, posttraumatic theater (Konopko 2010), and political performance (Haedicke et al. 2009). Political theater uses a variety of interactive tools to engage audiences (Prohorova and Shamina 2014), including street (Khattab 2015) and documentary theaters. However, while in social theater audiences rethink their own daily experiences, political theater appeals to the existing sociopolitical discourse, political system, and historical narrative (Beach 2005; Prohorova and Shamina 2014).

Applied theater and social theater sometimes are considered synonymous and umbrella terms for nontraditional theatrical practices in different parts of the world (Thompson 2003; Thompson and Schechner 2004). Both social theater and applied theater combine theatrical practices with drama therapy, and both focus on “the pluralization of perspectives, a tolerance for differences, and the capacity to question the status quo” (Jennings 2009:23). Social and applied theaters are indeed very related, but they also prioritize different aspects of performance: social theater calls attention to events, their participants, and their meaning for society, and applied theater emphasizes particular theatrical practices.

In the post-Soviet space social theater is mostly considered to be a type of modern theater or contemporary drama technique (Apchel 2011; Bolotian 2004, 2011; Lytvynenko 2007; Mamadnazarbekova 2012; Moskovkina and Nykolaeva 2005). There is also some research on the therapeutic effect of social theater on actors and audiences who find themselves in stressful situations and/or suffer from posttraumatic conditions (Lytvynenko 2012; Savinov 2016, 2017; Velimchanitsa 2015). Pedagogy also recognizes social theater as active learning methods (Kalashnikova 2016). Another popular interpretation of social theater sees it as a form of social activism aiming to improve social life (Homanyuk 2013b, 2015a, 2015b; Velimchanitsa 2015). Social theater is seen as helping to achieve society’s more important goals: prevention of social problems (Novhorodskiy 2014; Sorokin n.d.), helping people who suffer from PTSD (Savinov 2011, 2012, 2015), political transformations (Tkach 2017), crisis solution (Douset, Edeleva, and Zaharchenko 2007), or support for social innovations (Tiahlo 2015, 2016). Social theater is also used in social sciences as a post-qualitative research method (Denzin 2017; Homanyuk 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2015b; Kostenko and Tiahlo 2017a, 2017b).

To summarize, art studies focus on performance techniques used in social theater while neglecting both its impact on actors and audience and the real-life context of the plays. Psychology, social work, pedagogy, and sociology offer two approaches to social theater. The first approach sees it as a form of therapy and emphasizes the change it can cause in participants.<sup>4</sup> The second approaches it as a form of activism stressing the way social theater can influence the interpretation of social order and foster alternative social relations. Yet, to develop an adequate conception of social theater we need to combine these approaches. An understanding of social theater in terms of empowerment and emancipation developed in this article allows us to achieve this goal.

### **CONCEPTUALIZING TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL THEATER PARTICIPANTS**

This article aims to offer a sociological interpretation of social theater based on research conducted in Kharkiv. Majority of academic articles on social theater published in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia focus on how efficient and engaging performances are in terms of social changes. The meaning of social theater to its participants and personal transformations it can cause remain under-researched. Our research is premised on the idea that we need to study social theater with a focus on its participants. Some studies (Boehm and Boehm 2003; Wernick, Kulick, and Woodford 2014) conceptualize transformations happening to social theater participants as empowerment. Social theater is understood as a means of building critical consciousness, overcoming isolation, creating interpersonal relations, and translating thinking into action (based on participants' knowledge of their situation). As the process of empowerment itself, research into the impact of social theater on audiences is a lengthy one. Such research also requires a stable homogeneous group of social theater participants as an object of observation.

We can identify transformations happening to the participants of social theater if we consider its similarity to the emancipatory education of adults (Galloway 2015). This approach, as well as the theater of the oppressed and theater for dialogue (Boal 1993), is based on Paulo Freire's philosophy of education. In this tradition education is seen not as means to achieve opportunities (qualifications) or a way of integrating students into the existing social order (socialization); education is supposed to create opportunities for students to become human subjects emancipated from society. As Sarah Galloway argues, the key aspect of emancipatory education is relationships between teachers and students "predicated upon human qualities, in particular love, dialogue, trust and hope" (2015:60).

Thus, the practices of social theater can be considered both as empowering, since it helps to develop an understanding of identities and sense of belonging as well as to increase civic engagement (Wernick et al. 2014:840), and as the practice of emancipation.

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike some authors (e.g., Boehm and Boehm 2003; Wernick, Kulick, and Woodford 2014), we consider organizers, directors, jokers, conductors, spectators, and actors to be participants of social theater.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Social theater is a field (in Pierre Bourdieu's terms)—an organizational structure and community that transform a crisis or a conflict into a resource of individual development. These transformations take place both on personal and community levels. Conductors of playback theater and jokers in forum theater work with vulnerable groups or marginalized communities to empower them, in other words, to help them learn how to develop capacities for emotional self-control, understanding of identity and sense of belonging, critical consciousness, and how to turn thinking into action. The process of training social theater actors for future facilitation of group work takes place in the space of trust, dialogue, and equality, making social theater a space of emancipation.

In current Ukrainian circumstances, with the annexation of some territories, ongoing military operations (still not officially recognized as war), and civilian casualties, some people internalize the position of a victim, feeling that their personality and worldview are not valued. Social theater attempts to counteract these processes by changing the victim position of its participants. However, as we will demonstrate below, not all participants and audiences of social theater belong to vulnerable or marginalized groups, since they are not homogeneous in terms of their class position, property ownership, gender, ethnicity, and other social and demographic characteristics.

Kharkiv is an interesting place for research on social theater practices. In 2014 it managed to avoid the fate of Donetsk and Luhans'k (both cities were occupied by separatists). Now the city shares the border with both the Russian Federation and the territories that are not under control of the Ukrainian government. In contrast to the complex structure of the local frontier identity (Kravchenko 2009, 2010; Zhurzhenko 2011, 2015), Kharkiv authorities traditionally attempt to impose strict control on public space, suppressing alternative views.

Accordingly, the objective of this article is to interpret various nontraditional theater practices in Kharkiv as social theater and to demonstrate the personal transformation (including empowerment) of participants of these practices.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

To achieve this objective, we have undertaken a series of semistructured personal interviews with the participants of social theater in Kharkiv. We inquired about how and when our informants found out about social theater and why they decided to participate in it. Other questions were about the experience of participation in social theater and about the reaction of informants' relatives and friends to their involvement in social theater. We were interested in changes social theater caused in the lives of our informants, as well as in the role social theater played in their lives at that time. We asked informants with experience of work in a traditional theater about the differences and contradictions between the former and social theater.

Thirteen interviews that this article is based on were conducted between April 6 and September 19, 2018, in Kharkiv. Our informants participated in different the-

ater groups. One of the authors of the article is involved in the student theater at Karazin National University in Kharkiv, and this helped us find informants for our study. We also visited social theater performances that took place during that period and talked to their participants. We aimed to interview people who organized and participated in different forms of social theater. Some of the informants were spectators, who also can be considered participants or clients of social theater (in particular, internally displaced persons [IDPs]).

Because of the limited time for our study and since social theater performances were often spontaneous and did not have a regular schedule, the sample of the informants turned out to be rather heterogeneous. It includes four participants of forum and five of playback theaters, five actors, four stage directors and organizers of performances, and two spectators, and some informants had more than one role. All informants have a university degree, and nine have regular jobs (in addition to being involved in a social theater). Four informants have a degree in drama and performing arts. They used to work in state-run theaters but now belong to independent theater groups and work as stage directors and organizers of social theater projects in Kyiv, Zaporizhzhya, L'viv, and Donetsk.

Geographically, eight informants were from Kharkiv, two from Kyiv, one from Donetsk, Zaporizhzhya, and L'viv each, but at the time of the interviews they participated in activities in Kharkiv. Among the interviewees was a woman currently living on the territory under the separatists' control, a participant from Crimea, and several IPDs. The age and gender of our informants to some degree are characteristic of the situation in the social theater milieu but are not strictly representative. The majority of the informants (11) are women aged 23–55. The age of male informants ranges from 29 to 33. Table 1 summarizes sociodemographic data about the informants (all names have been changed).

**Table 1.** Data about the Informants

Name	Role in Social Theater	City of Residence	Gender	Age	University Degree
OB	Actor in forum theater	Kharkiv	F	23	Journalism
NL	Actor, organizer of forum theater	Kharkiv	M	30	Business management
MS	Actor in forum theater, spectator	Kharkiv	F	55	Applied mathematics
AS	Actor organizer of verbatim and playback theaters	Kharkiv	F	34	Education sciences
BS	Actor in playback theater, spectator	Kharkiv	F	23	Veterinary medicine, psychology
KL	Actor conductor in playback theater	Kharkiv	F	26	Biology
VU	Conductor, organizer of playback theater	Kharkiv	M	33	Radiophysics, psychology
SK	Actor in forum theater	Kyiv	F	25	Accounting, psychology

Name	Role in Social Theater	City of Residence	Gender	Age	University Degree
AT	Actor in forum and playback theaters	Donetsk	F	45	Educational science, law, social work
UA	Actor stage director in social theater	Kharkiv	F	29	Drama
NM	Actor stage director in social theater	Kyiv	F	51	Drama
VT	Organizer, stage director in social theater	Zaporizhzhya	F	45	Journalism
LN	Organizer, stage director in social theater	L'viv	M	29	Drama

### AGENDA OF SOCIAL THEATER PERFORMANCES IN KHARKIV

As mentioned above, our informants were participating in a social activity that uses some elements of drama, including a variety of nonconventional theatrical forms. Having analyzed our empirical data, we can correlate performances staged in Kharkiv with the following characteristics of social theater: direct connection between a creative product and real-life events, the involvement of amateur performers, encouraging the audience to participate in the performance, financial independence from state institutions, and the nonprofit status.

Our informants pointed out that in comparison with traditional theater, social theater is more relevant and connected to real life and the problems that performance participants are facing:

What I like about social theater and forum theater in particular ... I mean its advantages [over the] usual theater—first of all, it's because it is so close to real life. Secondly, people here are more natural. They don't have to learn their lines—they just say what's on their mind depending on the course of events. They just do what they might have done themselves in this situation, and they just try to show that to others. (OB)

Another informant, a playwright and stage director of verbatim and playback theater, also emphasized its relevance, that is, the connection between the performance and the place where it happens:

If I am creating a performance that has at least some clear connection with the city, its atmosphere, and things that are important for this place, this performance becomes socially relevant. Roughly speaking, it's about real-life situations that become part of the story we show on stage. (AS)

This informant stressed that verbatim creates a special connection between the person whose story is being told, the author of its interpretation, and the audience:

Yes, verbatim is a very interesting thing ... when I am collecting texts, I meet different people ... and I somehow resonate with some of them. For some un-

known reasons, based on some internal criteria and predispositions, I decide to approach a particular person. And the stories I hear from these people also resonate with me. We choose resonating stories, and we use them to create our texts. Of course, these are other people's stories, but I select them based on my choice, guided by my subconscious impulse. (AS)

Describing how they find and select stories, the conductor of the playback theater highlighted the role of the social background and the community where the performance is going to take place. The interest of the audience and their pressing problems are the most important criteria influencing a choice of topic for the performance.

What kind of problems are tackled by social theater in Kharkiv? Our research demonstrates the influence of the political crisis in Ukraine on the topics of social theater performances in Kharkiv. Thus, our informants mentioned local events of 2014:

In 2014 ... there was an attack on Kharkiv regional state administration. People with Saint George's ribbons<sup>5</sup> gathered around the Lenin Monument. At that time we were making a theater project about [Kharkiv's main] square.... [Together with] the artists who were preparing an exhibition in the [Contemporary Art] Center, we worked on creating a ... play. We were walking around the state administration building and the monument to Lenin interviewing people.... It was a big project called "12 Songs about Freedom" ... about the period when Kharkiv was in danger of being taken over [by the separatists]. We showed how people were dealing with this danger, and we continued this project ... when the war started.<sup>6</sup> (AS)

The informants also recalled numerous projects about the IDPs, for example:

People were trying to escape and take their children away from the antiterrorist operation (ATO) zone. Their bus was stopped at the border.<sup>7</sup> It wasn't quite clear who stopped them—a soldier from the DNR [the separatist Donetsk People's Republic] or somebody from our side. People from the national guard were there as well. So, one soldier refused to let the bus go, and a guy from the national guard told him, "Come on! Why don't you let them leave?" ... I played the role of the national guard soldier in that performance. (OB)

Our informants also described performances based on the events that had happened during the military operations and projects that they had helped organize in the so-called gray zone, close to the front.

Performances often presented witnesses' point of view, based on their perspectives and interpretations:

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<sup>5</sup> Saint George's ribbon is a heraldic element of the Russian Empire, a two-color ribbon with three black and two yellow stripes. It is a symbol of pro-Russian separatists and has been banned in Ukraine since 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Here the informant means the military actions on the territory of Donetsk and Luhans'k regions that have been taking place since 2014.

<sup>7</sup> The demarcation line with the uncontrolled territory.



This is what we call “neighbors’ stories.” Just like the name of the playback theater *Neighbors* (*sosedi*). People just come and tell stories. We neither set the agenda nor encourage the spectators to tell their stories. We have special groups that organize performances in some particular places, for particular communities, for example, in hospitals, for IDPs, for Protestant or Jewish communities.... We also work with ATO veterans. People in these communities ... introduce us to their specific stories. (VU)

Other performances covered urban problems, history, and culture of the city:

It’s about solving some of the problems we have in our city, as well as preserving its history, culture, and telling stories about people who lived in Kharkiv before the revolution [of 1917] but were unfairly forgotten. (MS)

Focus on social problems is one of the major features of social theater. A problem in these settings is mostly interpreted from the point of view of a particular person, recreating the speech of this person. But social theater also acts as a freeze-frame, focusing participants’ attention on certain seemingly insignificant situations and turning them into something meaningful. One of the organizers of forum theater conceptualized “social problems” for us in the following way:

We usually talk about social problems, such as family issues, public transport, personal relationships, and so forth. I understand that you [the interviewer] want me to speak about problems in our society or country. But I don’t like that. A lot of things around me push me in this direction, but I don’t like it. There are plenty of other issues that need a solution. For example, relationships between a mother and her child. The mother is always in a hurry and doesn’t devote enough attention to her child. She is always in a bad mood, so the child grows up to become a total psycho who doesn’t love anybody. (NL)

Thus, social theater works not only with social problems in a traditional understanding of the term (inequality, war, forced displacement, social and political conflicts); it works also with mundane situations, “insignificant things,” emotions and feelings. Usually, they are not considered to be related to social problems, but they really are manifestations of the social on the micro level of interpersonal interaction. Playback performances illustrate them using vivid stories:

I remember a story about boots. It was raining and there was a girl who was wearing rubber boots. She felt very comfortable and protected—at least, in the beginning. But then she fell and got soaking wet. That’s the whole story, but they told it in such a funny way ... There is one more story that I remember. A young woman told a story from her childhood. When she was a little girl, her mother sent her to a grocery store to buy something ... pepper, I guess. On her way there she met a man with some bad intentions. He tried to lure her to some private place, behind some garages. But she understood that something wrong was happening and ran away. When she came running back home, her mother asked her, “And where is the pepper?” The stories are really interesting, and the way they showed them ... well, it was very good. At least, the stories I remember. (BS)

The topics of performances result from a combination of socially relevant issues, the eagerness of certain communities to highlight and solve their problems, as well as personal interest of social theater organizers. Here one of the core values of social theater manifests itself: the participants' engagement with the problem and their proactive attitude. One of the informants described this as the social mission of social theater:

In terms of social mission ... [playback theater] is a great thing. There are so many communities and so many stories that need to be made public. Let's take [name] for example. [Name] is passionate about the topic of inclusion. She is part of an inclusive playback theater where some participants have mental issues. The entire topic of inclusion makes her tick. There is another participant, [name], from Kharkiv who is deeply involved in the problems of LGBT communities. As you can see, everybody in playback theater has their own ... mission. (VU)

Here is another quote illustrating social theater's focus on social problems and the proactive attitude of its participants (notably, our informant was expressing readiness to engage in a dialogue with representatives of state authorities to solve problems):

Forum theater raises social issues that the government cannot solve at the moment. We live in difficult times—it's the time of war, the time of changing our mentality and paradigms. That's why it's important to get your message across in the right way. It may be difficult to do so through official claims, complaints, and paperwork. But if we could invite one of those officials to our performance and show this problem from the inside, there may be a chance to solve it. (MS)

To summarize, focus on social problems and controversial issues is a feature that is commonly mentioned in descriptions of social theater. It also highlights one of the main distinctions between social and traditional theaters. As one of our informants emphasized, social theater does not aim to entertain the audience, unlike traditional theater:

Entertainment is the major function of traditional theater. Social theater, on the contrary, is far from being entertaining. Its main goal is to solve some problems. In other words, it is not about entertaining people but about making them think and look for their own solutions. (OB)

## **INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION IN EMANCIPATORY SPACE OF SOCIAL THEATER**

Individual transformation of social theater participants is possible because social theater is a space of emancipation. Social theater provides opportunities for people to achieve new levels of freedom, to realize themselves as human subjects (Galloway 2015). Levels of freedom refer here to the freedom of action (an opportunity to participate in communal activities of social theater, trying out different roles), free-

dom of thought (an opportunity to suggest a topic for the performance, to see one's problem from various points of view), freedom from restraints imposed by one's social standing (anyone can become an actor), and so forth.

Social theater is a special space for emancipation due to the nature of relationships that it builds among the participants. Among reasons for participation in social theater, in addition to the professional and social ones, our informants emphasized the special atmosphere created by the participants' relationships. One of the informants—a performer in forum theater—told us how social theater resonated with her desire to combine creativity and a proactive position in social life:

It's probably because I like theater in general ... and I'm drawn to this creative side of life. As a spectator, I've always wanted to try to do something as a performer. I've always wanted to show something to other people and see their reactions. In other words, I want to be on stage and show something rather than watch. (OB)

Thus it can be assumed that people who come to social theater (and playback in particular) usually take a proactive approach in society and work in NGOs. As for people with a background in traditional theater, playback offers them new professional techniques and opportunities. People experiencing difficult life situations—and IDPs, in particular—can also find themselves in social theater:

I used to communicate with psychologists quite often. In psychology it is very important to be able to find a common language, to understand another person.... Playback is a very interesting method that can help you in your job. After that, there was a big three-day coaching session where there were people from Kramatorsk and other places in Luhans'k and Donetsk regions. Those were IDPs, leaders of some NGOs. I mean those were the people who really cared about things. Even though they have been forced to change their place of residence, workplace, and their whole way of life, they still find the courage to live a good life and make this life more comfortable. Instead of suffering from constant shock, those people managed to adapt their lives to the new unfortunate circumstances. (MS)

Our informants emphasized different aspects of this phenomenon, based on their experiences with and knowledge of social theater. Often the most attractive thing about social theater is audience involvement, that is, breaking down the barrier between performers and spectators. This is how a person who became familiar with social theater (playback theater) just recently perceived this situation:

Surely I have been to the usual theaters. And I also have been to a theater that was quite unusual. I don't know how to explain what exactly seemed unusual to me. There were only three actors there, and one of them did most of the job. The title of the performance was "Ty SVO" [You are a bastard]. Frankly speaking, I don't know if it was really unconventional.... It was just different from what I am used to. There was a live interaction between the actors and the audience. It was very unusual. (VS)

Relations of equality within social theater created by the involvement of spectators in the performance abolish the hierarchy between the stage and the audience, between the performers who act and the spectators who passively absorb impressions. It becomes especially obvious if we look at the role of the joker in a forum theater, which is compared with the role of the stage director in a traditional theater. According to one of our informants who left her job in a state-run theater in Kharkiv to join independent theatrical projects and social theater, the traditional position of a stage director is associated with tyranny and oppressive practices. She believes that social theater exemplifies the evolution of modern theater towards democracy, where the content of performances is based on the real feelings of the performers.

It is very popular in contemporary Ukraine and in the whole world to [establish] theaters as a platform of democracy ... without tyrants, without a stage director who says, "You do this, and you do that. Very good. Now let's sing together a happy song about freedom." ... We wondered if there is a way to organize a performance without this person, where this role is replaced by a group of people who come up with different suggestions. (UA)

This lack of traditional hierarchical relations in social theater provides its participants with a wide range of opportunities, allowing them to experiment with different roles and with a sense of self. One of the actors in a forum theater emphasized the fact that one person can perform a variety of functions in social theater: the participant can change their functions in the social theater according to the aspirations. This is what she experienced during her training:

I have several different roles here.... First of all, I am a trainee who knows nothing. My job is to learn. At the second stage I become a person whose opinion is important. I become a scriptwriter. In other words, being part of the same team, I participate in creating the plot of our performance. Later on I may perform the function of a stage director for some parts of the performance. If you have an idea of how to play some particular scene, which words to say or what kind of pose to adopt, you can share your idea with the rest of the team. Everybody can contribute to the process. This is my third role—I am a stage director. If I show that on the stage, I play my fourth role—I become an actor. As for the fifth role, I also participate in the discussion that always follows the performance. So, I leave my role of an actor and become ... a partner in a conversation with the spectators. (MS)

Jonathan Fox, the founder of playback theater, also pointed out the equality of relations in social theater and playback theater in particular.<sup>8</sup> He emphasized the differences between the power of a psychotherapist and that of a playback theater conductor because actors are as vulnerable as people telling their life stories during

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<sup>8</sup> "Jonathan Fox. Pleibek teatr—terapevticheskii li eto teatr?" Video recording of a master class by Jonathan Fox, December 5, 2008, Moscow, video, 1:02:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HS01DL7478c>.

a performance. In other words, the function of a person who runs a social theater performance (a joker in a forum theater or a conductor in a playback theater) is fundamentally different from the role of a stage director in a traditional theater. They are a mediator who always crosses the borders, disrupts hierarchies, and provokes the spectators, encouraging them to say or do something. The practice of using English words (conductor, joker) for this role in Ukraine instead of translating them or using more familiar terms (leader, producer, stage director) can be explained by the desire to recreate a specific style of social theater where team effort is more important than personal leadership.

This feature of social theater is revealed in its other name: peer-to-peer. One informant, a social theater organizer from Zaporizhzhya, told us about the following experience of creating performances for teenagers:

We have young students who show performances to their peers. We call it a “peer-to-peer” project. It goes a bit beyond the framework of forum theater since they play the roles of people who are the same as themselves.... Everything is done by peers. It’s very exciting because young people are eager to listen to their peers. (VT)

According to our informants, the division of social theater participants into actors and spectators is rather nominal. They can swap their roles during training in forum theater. Here is what one of our informants told us about her first encounter with social theater:

The joker arrived and divided us into two groups. The people in the first group were actors, and the others were spectators. We were reenacting some problem, and this is how I learned what it is all about.... It was the first time I had ever seen such a thing. (OB)

Such relations are a prerequisite for communicating with a person in difficult social conditions, a person with low social status, or with people who consider themselves oppressed. Openness and trust create a foundation enabling communication and cooperation in any kind of social theater. Horizontal power relations also allow one to speak about oneself and one’s life situation. They also encourage accepting self-responsibility.

While in the quote above the informant used the words “the joker arrived” to recall the first acquaintance with social theater, other informants sometimes describe this experience in a more proactive way—“I applied for a training course” or “I took a course”—and they mention coaches from abroad (the United States, Russia, Europe) and from other cities in Ukraine (Dnipro, Zaporizhzhya, L’viv). Thus, social theater breaks limitations on communication, establishes new connections and relationships, and builds up social capital. Participation in social theater also develops communication skills. This was mentioned by an informant, a professional playwright, who runs a verbatim theater in L’viv:

Thanks to the theater, I befriended many people with whom I can work. It was quite a change for me. I learned how to communicate with other people. I used to be a very introverted person who had difficulty asking a passer-by for the time. (LN)

Social theater (playback in particular) helps to develop another similar skill, the ability to reflect on your own and your partner's emotional state. The informants see the acquisition of this skill as evidence of both individual transformation and the therapeutic effect of social theater. One of our informants, an organizer of playback theater in Donetsk, explained:

Playback teaches you empathy. Now even in everyday life, when I'm trying to negotiate something or when I need something from a public servant ... I always pay attention to what people feel and what they want. I find it much easier to communicate with people when I focus on [their] feelings ... now it is easier for me to understand how conflicts or contradictions emerge, what triggers clashes of interests or opinions in everyday communication. I'm not talking about politics here. I only mean usual communication between people and how we can avoid interpersonal conflicts. (AT)

Therefore, social theater is not only about "ways of making visible the oppressive structures of the culture" (Denzin 2017:14). It also teaches how to avert conflicts caused by cultural differences and contradictory identity politics. Our informants also believe that social theater practices can rectify the adverse influence of cultural and structural limitations imposed by the social position of a person, like in cases when adult people could become involved in theater practices previously unavailable to them:

I think forum theater ... allows you to open up and be absolutely sincere.... If you have always been told that you are not good at this or that, there's a risk that you will give up on some of your hidden talents. Forum theater is just the place that helps you discover your inner resources.... A lot of people used to dream somehow about theater or some kind of performance when they were children. However, these dreams are seldom realized.... First, you need to get a job that will bring you money, and theater is hardly a place where you can do so. (MS)

Noncommercial nature is another important common feature of all social theater practices that distinguishes them as an emancipation space. Our informants confirmed that social theater performances are free and are usually organized with the help of international grants or at the expense of social theater participants.

Another essential feature of social theater is the fact that its participants are amateurs. The "barrier to entry" in social theater is low. Anybody, without any special training or degree, can acquire basic knowledge about drama, develop acting skills, and take part in performances. Here is what one of our informants, an actor in playback theater, said:

Besides theater, I have a regular job. Everybody in my group ... is involved in something else.... We all have jobs like anybody else.... I've heard a lot of things ... like "oh, it's only until you get married" or "until you have kids," [it's a] "Sunday club," "sublimation" [*laughing*], and many other things that devalue what I am doing. Well, I don't care. (KL)

These two aspects (being noncommercial and nonprofessional) are very important. Social theater can disrupt the power of money and traditional schooling. It sets people free from the tenets of market economy or professional education. It encourages the participants and the audience to become proactive, to think critically about their current life situations, to single out their most urgent problems, to share experience, and to find a solution. Social theater grants recognition here and now, regardless of one's social status, success, or failure. Our informant who is a participant and organizer of forum theater in Donetsk told us:

I strongly associate [social theater] ... with personal freedom, with your desire to come out of your shell and believe that you and your beliefs are real, that you have the right to interfere into some processes only because you exist and you have an opinion about how things should be. (AT)

Jonathan Fox's views support this idea. During his master class on playback theater, he says that situations reenacted here become public. Stories, when heard by spectators, become a part of their own experience. The participants are free to tell both "serious" and "not that serious" stories. In other words, here you can share anything regardless of how pointless your story may seem from the point of view of the traditional hierarchy of meaning generated by the dominant discourse and culture. The latter restricts individuals, their perceptions of themselves and the surrounding world, and, particularly, their access to social support, recognition, and compassion. This kind of support and the right of legitimate naming (Bourdieu 1989:21) are a privilege available only to famous or people with high social standing, such politicians, artists, or renowned scientists. In social theater everybody has an opportunity to tell their stories in public.

Social theater helps participants to develop communication skills and self-reflection skills that may help transform their weaknesses and vulnerabilities into strengths. Besides, social theater, as a field of sociocultural interaction, gives the participants certain privileges such as a right to articulate their own story and their interpretation of the life events, which will be respected by everyone present at the performance. This respect functions outside of the sphere of the dominant discourses, helping to subvert them. Social theater as emancipatory space allows its participants to feel seen and heard while expressing their opinions and worldviews. However, this also creates potential and real tensions between the spaces of social theater and spaces external to it (authorities, institutions, formal and informal politics, and activism). Consequently, the space of emancipation, experimentation with social roles, and interpretations that social theater offers can easily become a target for radical and violent supporters of the dominant social order. This raises the important question of the

safety of social theater performances, but also leads us to the conclusion that the competences social theater organizers need to develop also include the ability to detect and work with social differences that become even more evident at the time of social crisis. This is particularly pertinent in Kharkiv, a city in a volatile situation, determined both by its proximity to the war and problematic local authorities.

According to one of our informants, since “your safety is of a greater value than the ability to make a statement” (referring to the events of 2014 in Kharkiv that were mentioned above), local social theater groups developed safety instructions for participants. For instance, she described how they work with LGBTQI topics, which routinely attract radical and violent protesters:

If I wanted to organize a public forum theater performance and if I knew that it would be about the LGBTQI community, I would make it a closed event accessible only by invitation ... But in fact, this doesn't guarantee anything ... There is a real risk that the event could be disrupted if we made it public ... Far-right organizations like to come to such events and try to ruin them. (SK)

Similarly, our informant recounted a situation when a group of far-right activists came to a forum theater performance in Kharkiv in 2017. They tried to interrupt the performance aggressively. The performance, devoted to the topic of discrimination, covered two everyday stories, one relating to bullying in schools and another to a broken elevator in an apartment building. Far-right groups were triggered because the participants of the performance included youth not only from Ukraine and Europe but also from Russia. They accused the organizers of spreading “pacifist propaganda” and “helping the aggressor.” The jokers and organizers of the event managed to prevent this aggressive group from using violence by seeking help from the police and the Security Service of Ukraine, but social theater community still remembers this accident as unacceptably dangerous.

These cases illustrate how social theater organizers in Kharkiv have managed to develop important competence of ensuring the safety of participants. The need to protect this emancipatory space from the violent and undemocratic outsiders contributed to certain transformations in individuals involved in social theater.

Playback theater competes with the dominant discourse by giving anybody from the audience an opportunity to tell their story in public. One of our informants uses this to explain the popularity of social theater:

We have very few opportunities for self-expression and social ... alternatives. We really have a very poor choice here. Sometimes we don't even have enough time to promote our performance, but we still have a sufficient number of spectators. This means that people really need what we do. (AT)

In other words, social theater is a space for self-expression, and the alternative it provides is perceived as potential opposition to the dominant order. It is especially relevant for our society with its totalitarian legacy of mono-ideology and monoculture.



## SOCIAL THEATER AS A PLACE OF EMPOWERMENT

The peoples' knowledge of their situation becomes a key element of social theater performances. During forum theater performance, knowledge, understanding of the situation, and experience of the spectator can suggest a solution to the problem and lead to an alternative ending. This knowledge proves the potential of participants to change their condition. The empowerment strategies of social theater are based on this assumption. Different formats of social theater use their own techniques for receiving the knowledge needed to solve the problem. But all of them solve the problems by foregrounding the community's own resources and facilitating its joint efforts. Social theater provides its participants with opportunities to solve their problems, control themselves and their life situations. People with such experience no longer feel like victims or losers. This is the strategy of empowerment implemented by social theater.

Social theater play is a documentary story that is clear and relatable to actors and spectators. Once on stage, this story ceases to be the local, secondary, or the history of the victim. The actors and audience of social theater are the storytellers and also become the main characters. This shifting of roles helps to jump-start a process of self-reflection about their weakness and vulnerability.

Encouraging the spectators to participate in creation or presentation of the performance is a distinctive feature of social theater, setting it apart from the traditional theater. The latter relies on a clear boundary between the stage and the audience, between actors and spectators. According to the definition of playback theater given by one of our informants, audience involvement is key. It accentuates all the basic values of social theater—the importance of lived experience of everybody present at the performance and multiple interpretations of the situation:

Playback is like this. People come and tell their stories. The stories are very concrete. This can be a big tragedy or some fleeting impression. But they are all equally important. I understand the value of these stories, and I want to maintain this value in some way. (AS)

Another informant agreed, even though she was speaking about forum theater:

Once we have selected a problem, the performers of forum theater bring the story to its culmination and stop at this point. After that, anybody from the audience can come out and say how this situation can be transformed to avoid a crisis. (MS)

However, audience involvement is not only about spectators performing some function in a predefined procedure or ritual, such as reacting to what they have seen (forum theater) or telling a story (playback). Spectators, with their beliefs, experience, readiness to talk about certain issues, and their current mood, influence the whole performance, its outcome, and various interpretations. A joker from forum theater commented:

You see, I can set some agenda, but the spectators turn it upside down. The audience can interpret the situation in a way that is entirely different from what we planned in the beginning. It may be deeper or broader. Or they can merely fall for some particular idea and change the whole course of the event. (NL)

Another informant developed this idea even further, describing the connection and relationships between performers and spectators:

It really works, but it's different every time. At some performances the audience is ready to go deeper. During other performances the audience doesn't want to go deeper at all. They are just happy to splash in these shallow waters. This is probably just the effect that we want to achieve—they are all dabbling together in these shallow waters and they are happy. (KL)

Hence, social theater performers and spectators find themselves in a common field of values, norms, and beliefs. Solutions to various problems can be achieved by generating new values in this common field, with the involvement of everyone present at the moment. Finding the solution to a problem becomes an external, eventful manifestation of the complex transformation that occurs with the participants. This includes changing the role from passive observer to participant, identifying the importance of one's own experience and knowledge. Participants gain a unique experience of being active based on their own views and beliefs. It is impossible to predict the result of a talk or performance, either in terms of values or emotions.

Another aspect of the empowerment potential of social theater is its ability to popularize the discourse of liberation. If we qualify social theater as a kind of volunteer social work or leisure drama club for adults, it looks like a safe and socially approved space. However, if we consider the transformations experienced by the participants, the power of social theater as a method becomes more evident: "In fact, it's a powerful weapon, a valuable tool for democracy. I am afraid they may prohibit it one day because it's an instrument of propaganda which is very delicate and subtle" (VT). This statement shows the legacy of a totalitarian society where the state had absolute power to allow or prohibit activities of the citizens. This interpretation seems logical considering the age of the informant. She is 45 years old, which means that her primary socialization took place during the Soviet period. However, the quote highlights the problem of wider public acceptance of the ideas of the oppressed (Freire 1970) and the possibility of liberation discourse in the public field, currently dominated by discourses of Ukrainian nationalism and neoliberal capitalism. (This important topic requires special attention and goes beyond the scope of this article.) It can be assumed that on different levels of social interaction the liberation discourse of the oppressed will encounter different levels of resistance, and the group interaction can be the most favorable ground for developing this discourse.

Thus, the informants mentioned the effectiveness of social theater techniques in the so-called closed groups. These groups may involve parents of children with disabilities, ethnic minorities, LGBTQI, abused women, and so on:

In open groups, it is not always clear what kind of social function [social theater] has. But then we organize a private performance for ... let's say, people who have suffered violence ... and we don't invite outsiders to this community. Or a group for mothers whose children have developmental disorders. When these women start talking about their problems and sharing them with others, they are happy to find answers to each other's problems. (KL)

Social theater also helps its participants to articulate their concerns, creating an atmosphere of trust and safe communication. An organizer of forum theater described this process:

We can choose a specific topic, but I'm not a great fan of doing so. I want to create a space for issues that are interesting for the audience. I mean, there is a group of people who gathered in one place. They can think of some social problems that they want to discuss. You have one hour to choose a common topic, find a situation, and rehearse it. So, there isn't much time for wild imagination. (NL)

In terms of social theater, calling a certain group of people a "closed group" means recognizing that these people have similar problems or needs that are either incomprehensible or unimportant to the rest of the society. For this reason, they are only willing to talk about their problems to people like them. The task for a social theater team is to find participants and organize a safe space for communication. One of our informants, a participant of forum theater, stated that people from all walks of life can be in such groups, regardless of their financial status:

Our spectators come to us with some inquiry, and we come to them ... physically.... Entering the community of this special audience means infiltrating.... And it's not only about groups with specific problems.... We used to work with the Jewish community. In a way, it is a private group too ... even though there are different people there and quite well-to-do people too. We've also had a funny experience of working with the city court. Those people are also quite well-off, but this is a private group, and they will only work as a group when access is forbidden to anybody else. (KL)

James Thompson and Richard Schechner (2004) note that audiences of social theater include local residents, people with disabilities, young prisoners, and many other representatives of vulnerable, disadvantaged, and marginalized communities, including internally and externally displaced persons and people experiencing homelessness. Our interviews with social theater participants and organizers in Kharkiv in 2018 expand this description of social theater participants by adding individuals who have lost touch with a sense of belonging to the group that is not widely considered as marginalized or vulnerable.

## CONCLUSIONS

The crisis spawned by the abuse of power that led to the Euromaidan protests, the annexation of the Crimea, and military operations in Donbas contributed to the

growing popularity of social theater. Different forms of social theater, including forum theater and playback, analyzed in this article are characterized by their purposefully amateur character, audience involvement, absence of control from formal institutions, financial independence from the state, and the nonprofit status. These features were described and illustrated by the data collected through interviews with social theater participants in Kharkiv. The unprecedented societal demand for alternative forms of political and civic activism, alternative theater, social work with vulnerable groups, demands for education, and so on can explain the popularity of social theater practices.

Social theater can be an instrument for analyzing current social problems and looking for possible solutions. Social theater becomes a means of dialogue within the society, a way of teaching peer-to-peer interaction as a precondition of the coexistence of people with different opinions and positions. The emphasis on these very features of social theater in combination with its focus on the socially relevant issues in Ukraine (revolution, war, IDPs, vulnerable groups, gender violence, people with disabilities, etc.) classifies social theater as a form of civic activism. This makes social theater a meaningful sociocultural phenomenon both for its participants and society in general.

There is a need to continue research into the potential of social theater to empower and emancipate its participants in Ukraine. Future research can also focus on social theater as a "new" social field emerging on the margins and on the overlaps of the fields of traditional theater, social work, and psychotherapy. This article demonstrates that the study of social theater with a focus on empowerment and emancipation of its participants can be fruitful if observations are focused on each form of social theater (playback and forum theater here) and on specific theater collectives and their projects. Obviously, future research also depends on the dynamics of the development of social theater in Ukraine, its relations with traditional theater, social work practices, and civic activism.

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## СОЦИАЛЬНЫЙ ТЕАТР В КРИЗИСНЫЕ ВРЕМЕНА В УКРАИНЕ: СОЦИОЛОГИЧЕСКАЯ ПЕРСПЕКТИВА (НА МАТЕРИАЛАХ ХАРЬКОВА)

**Юлия Сорока, Анна Савченко**

*Юлия Сорока, кафедра социологии, социологический факультет, Харьковский национальный университет имени В. Н. Каразина. Адрес для переписки: Харьковский национальный университет, пл. Свободы, 6, Харьков, 61022, Украина. [yuliya.soroka@karazin.ua](mailto:yuliya.soroka@karazin.ua).*

*Анна Савченко, театрально-импровизационное шоу «Потішне Шо?». Адрес для переписки: Харьковский национальный университет, пл. Свободы, 6, Харьков, 61022, Украина. [1anna.savchenko@gmail.com](mailto:1anna.savchenko@gmail.com).*

Разнообразные интерактивные театральные технологии широко используются в работе с маргинализированными группами, в социальной работе, социальной педагогике, психотерапии. Политический кризис в Украине, порожденный злоупотреблением властью, приведшим к Евромайдану, аннексии Крыма и военными действиями на Донбассе, способствовал распространению социального театра как формы социального активизма. Социальный театр характеризуется участием непрофессиональных актеров, вовлечением зрителей в представления и последующие обсуждения, а сюжеты пьес строятся на основе реальных историй и событий. Социальный театр концептуализируется через разграничение с традиционным театром и отождествляется с документальной драмой. В отличие от политического театра, фокусирующего внимание на критике политической системы, социальный театр акцентирует социальные противоречия и неравенства; это отличает его от арт-терапии, где объектом воздействия является отдельная личность. В социологии он рассматривается в перспективе социальных трансформаций. Для анализа этих процессов на микроуровне в статье используются понятия эмансипации и наделения властью. Эмпирическую основу статьи составили интервью с участниками форум- и плейбек-театров, проведенные в Харькове в 2018 году. Среди городов Украины, где существуют группы социального театра, Харьков выделяется своей близостью к зоне боевых действий и к Российской Федерации. В 2014 году он счастливо избежал судьбы захваченных сепаратистами Донецка и Луганска. В противовес комплексной структуре локальной пограничной идентичности, местная власть, вытесняя альтернативные взгляды, традиционно удерживает жесткий контроль над публичным пространством города. Материалы статьи отвечают на вопросы о том, каким темам были посвящены представления социального театра в Харькове в исследуемый период, как происходят индивидуальные трансформации участников в эмансипирующем пространстве социального театра, как отличительные особенности социального театра превращают его в место наделения властью.

**Ключевые слова:** социальный театр; форум-театр; плейбек; вербатим; эмансипация; наделение властью