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THEATER AS A CULTURAL INSTITUTION

Background. In 2023–2024, Ukraine, particularly Kyiv, has witnessed a theatrical renaissance amid the ongoing full-scale war. Theaters have become vital psychological and cultural spaces, attracting new audiences and hosting productions by European directors. However, significant challenges persist, including the loss of actors due to mobilization, and deteriorating theater infrastructure. Moreover, while theater attendance is rising in key cultural hubs, accessibility and engagement remain uneven across the country.

Objective: This study examines the genesis, functions, and mission of theater as a cultural institution and analyzes its role in the contemporary and challenging Ukrainian context.

Methods. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, this study uses the following methods: a literature review–analyzing scholarly works in theater studies, cultural studies, and communication research to define theater's role as a socio-cultural institution; and content analysis–examining social media reviews and publications to assess regional disparities in theater attendance and infrastructural conditions.

Results. The research confirms that Ukrainian theater meets all three key criteria of a cultural institution. Theater operates as a regulatory system of values, norms, and artistic standards, shaping social consciousness and preserving national identity, particularly during wartime. Theater functions as a stable form of social behavior, fostering communication, audience engagement, and psychological resilience. Theater serves as a specialized organization that produces, preserves, and promotes cultural heritage while adapting to contemporary challenges. The study highlights the evolving role of theaters beyond entertainment, as they engage in social activism, education, and therapeutic support.

Conclusions. Theater in Ukraine remains a crucial socio-cultural phenomenon that reflects and influences social norms, values, and collective resilience. However, disparities in regional engagement, infrastructural challenges, and the need for adaptive strategies in the digital era present ongoing concerns. The future of theaters as cultural institutions depends on their ability to balance artistic integrity with social responsibility, especially in the face of war-related disruptions.

Keywords: theater, culture, cultural institution, theatrical art, cultural policy, aesthetics.

Background

Ukraine, and especially Kyiv, has experienced a theatrical renaissance in 2023–2024. In the 2024 theatrical review for Dzerkalo Tyzhnia, theater critic Yuliya Samborska (2024) notes that despite the war, theaters have become a kind of "psychologist" for society, providing an opportunity to escape reality. The popularity of theatrical performances has grown, new audiences have emerged, and productions by European directors have been staged. Despite significant losses within the theater community—many actors have been mobilized, and some have died at the front—theater troupes have adapted to new conditions, changed their repertoires, and brought in new actors. Volunteer activities have remained an important part of theatrical life, with many artists organizing fundraising initiatives to support the military and humanitarian needs (Samborska, 2024).

However, unfortunately, this so-called "theatrical renaissance" is not observed in all theaters across the country. Outside cultural hubs like Kyiv, Odesa, and Lviv, people are not attending performances as actively. Social media contains numerous comments about how tickets for shows in Kyiv are nearly impossible to find, whereas in regional centers, even on premiere days, good seats remain available. For instance, this Facebook post highlights a well-received performance at the Olha Kobylanska Chernivtsi Academic Regional Ukrainian Music and Drama Theater, yet with a sparsely attended audience (<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1BNsUpKsH/>).

Another issue is the deteriorating condition of theater buildings, such as the Maria Zankovetska National Drama Theater in Lviv or the Dnipro Academic Drama and Comedy Theater "Dramikom", among many others across Ukraine.

Nevertheless, in the general context, theater attendance in Ukraine has been steadily increasing in 2023–2024. On the website of the Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theater, tickets—despite the introduction of mandatory authentication through the Diia app—sell out within the first 10–15 minutes (Kyshnevskyi, 2024). This underscores the relevance of theater as a cultural institution.

Objective: to explore theater as a cultural institution by outlining its genesis, functions, and mission both in general and specifically within the current socio-cultural and political context of Ukraine.

Literature Review. Theater as a cultural institution is the subject of numerous studies that analyze its social, aesthetic, and communicative functions. The historical development of theater, its impact on society, and its transformations in response to contemporary challenges are explored in the works of both foreign and Ukrainian researchers. O. G. Brockett and F. G. Hildy (2014), in their seminal work *History of the Theatre*, emphasize that performative elements are an integral part of any society. The concept of a cultural institution, to which the theater belongs, is examined in the research of I. Maslikova (2020). Sheeba Azhar and Syed Abid Ali (2015) highlight that theater reflects social and economic conditions, interacts with the community, fulfills educational and entertainment functions, and serves as a tool for social critique. Ukrainian researcher T. Kremeshna (2021) analyzes the therapeutic effect of theater. The concept of theater as a communicative space is explored in the studies of V. Panasyuk and K. Yudova-Romanova (2023). Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of "dramaturgy" compares social life to theater, where each individual plays a specific role. Contemporary research on theater in Ukraine

demonstrates its evolution in the context of wartime. O. Klekovkin (2012) provides a comprehensive analysis of the term "theater" and its functions.

Methods

The research is based on an interdisciplinary approach that combines: 1) analysis of scholarly literature – examining works in theater studies, cultural sociology, and communication research to define the role of theater as a socio-cultural institution; 2) content analysis – examining social media reviews and publications about theatrical life in different regions of Ukraine to identify disparities in the development of the theater sector, among other aspects.

Results

O. G. Brockett and F. G. Hildy (2014) begin their *History of the Theatre* by outlining the idea that performative elements – whether dramatic, theatrical, or symbolic – are an integral part of any society, regardless of its level of development. These elements manifest not only in the ritual dances of ancient tribes but also in contemporary election campaigns, celebrations, sporting events, religious ceremonies, and even children's games. However, most people do not perceive such moments as "theater", even though they are filled with spectacle, dialogue, and dramatic conflict. This is why it is important to distinguish between theater as an art form and entertainment, and theatricality, which naturally emerges in various spheres of life (Brockett & Hildy, 2014, p. 15).

At the same time, celebrations, sports events, and religious ceremonies, when they acquire an organized character, transform into cultural institutions. As I. Maslikova notes: "Cultural institutions should be understood in three aspects. First, in the normative-regulatory aspect, a cultural institution is a set of values, rules, principles, and norms that determine, define, and regulate socio-cultural activities in their various forms. Second, in the behavioral-procedural aspect, cultural institutions represent a stable type of social behavior that is realized in socio-cultural activities and is expressed through specific behavioral models, institutional roles, and forms of collective interaction. Third, in the activity-organizational aspect, cultural institutions are specialized organizations-structured associations of people within which cultural goods are produced, accumulated, preserved, presented, and promoted to meet the cultural needs of citizens" (Maslikova, 2020, p. 11).

Thus, we analyze theater as a cultural institution according to these three aspects:

1) as a set of values, rules, principles, and norms that determine, define, and regulate socio-cultural activities in their various forms.

2) as a stable type of social behavior, expressed in socio-cultural activities through specific behavioral models, institutional roles, and forms of collective interaction.

3) as specialized organizations or establishments, structured associations of people that produce, accumulate, preserve, present, and promote cultural goods to meet the cultural needs of citizens.

In 2021, a theater seminar was held in Sopot as part of the *Twelfth Between.Pomiędzy Festival*, where the issue of theater as a social institution in the contemporary European space was discussed. Theater professionals from the United Kingdom, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland examined contemporary transformations in theater. Participants emphasized that theaters are no longer limited to art alone; they now engage in social activism, education, and public dialogue. Increasingly, they function as communication centers, organizing workshops,

educational initiatives, and audience engagement programs, particularly for marginalized groups. Topics discussed included the impact of the pandemic on theaters, which forced them to rethink ways of communicating with audiences and the format of dramatic works; the role of dramaturgy in the transformation of theater amid the ongoing crisis; and the rethinking of theater as a means of social integration, particularly through projects like the Listen Local initiative at the Royal Court Theatre, which involves local communities in creating their own performances. Another key discussion was about the mission of theater: should it serve as a tool for social change or remain a purely artistic platform? Some critics, such as Michael Raab, warned that theater could turn into a mechanism for moralization and social integration, losing its artistic essence. The seminar highlighted that changes in theater are not a matter of choice but a historical necessity reflecting broader cultural and social transformations. One of the biggest challenges for theater institutions today is finding a balance between artistic self-expression and social responsibility, which will continue to shape the future of theater. Among the most thought-provoking ideas was the notion that the mission of theater is not merely to convey a message for a passive audience to receive and interpret but to stimulate active viewer response and integrate these reactions into the artistic and production system (Lachman, 2021).

Indian scholars Sheeba Azhar and Syed Abid Ali argue that drama and theatrical performances today function as a social force. They state that theater reflects social and economic conditions, as playwrights cannot ignore their audiences – given that theater serves as a platform for conveying social, economic, or spiritual ideas. Theater interacts with the community both internally—as a creative collective of actors, directors, and technical staff – and externally – as a platform for engaging with audiences and society. At the same time, theater can serve as both an educational and entertainment tool and a medium for raising important social issues. Theater practitioners cannot ignore audience expectations. According to scholars, if theater only presents familiar themes, it does not contribute to audience development, while if it stages entirely incomprehensible performances, it risks losing its audience. Theater thus balances between preserving traditions and exploring new forms of communication with viewers. Today, traditional three-act dramaturgy is giving way to fragmented, montage techniques that better fit the contemporary media landscape. Theater is shifting away from the rational analysis of characters and focusing more on emotional expression. It reflects the social relations of its time and becomes an art form of social interaction. Economic difficulties have pushed theaters to seek funding from government institutions, altering their mission: they now must justify their social value. Theater does not exist separately from social processes but instead mirrors social movements and issues. Drama evokes emotions, provokes thought, entertains, challenges, disturbs, and releases energy. For Indian scholars, theater is not just an artistic practice but a powerful social mechanism that shapes public consciousness and reflects reality, influencing values and moral principles in those who engage with it (Azhar, & Ali, 2015).

Ukrainian researcher T. Kremeshna (2021) analyzes the social role of theater and its therapeutic effects. She writes that Aristotle's theory of catharsis provided an understanding of art, particularly theater, as a medium with the ability to purify and transform human consciousness,

shifting moral orientations. Theater has always fulfilled a social function, influencing mass consciousness through artistic imagery and shaping social behavior. From ancient rituals to the modern stage, theater has served as a unifying force that fosters social cohesion and collective values. According to Kremeshna, modern sociology views theater as a system of socially significant actions that impact societal processes, education, and communication (Kremeshna, 2021, p. 102).

The researcher outlines several art-therapeutic functions of theater:

- Cathartic – cleansing from negative emotions.
- Regulatory – relieving nervous tension and modeling a positive psycho-emotional state.
- Communicative-reflective – developing interpersonal interaction skills and fostering appropriate social behavior (Kremeshna, 2021, p. 103).

Ukrainian scholars V. Panasyuk and K. Yudova-Romanova (2023) also support the idea that theater is a unique form of communication. In their article, they echo their Indian colleagues, arguing that theater is not merely a stage, actors, and scenery but a complex socio-cultural process in which playwrights, directors, actors, and audiences interact. Renowned Ukrainian director and actor Les Kurbas, as early as 1925, emphasized three essential components of theater: ideology, the artistic work itself, and the audience. Contemporary researchers agree that theater is a living system of communication that is activated the moment the curtain rises. French philosopher Roland Barthes compared it to a "cybernetic machine", creating a multi-layered process of transmission and reception. Every element of a performance influences the audience, provoking emotions, thoughts, and reflections (Panasyuk & Yudova-Romanova, 2023, p. 36).

Ukrainian researcher N. Korniyenko describes theater as an indicator of societal transformations. It not only reflects reality but also integrates into public life, becoming part of politics, culture, and even everyday existence. This explains the phenomenon of the "theatricalization of society", where different spheres of life take on a performative character (Dutchak et al., 2010, p. 202).

American sociologist Erving Goffman, in his theory of "dramaturgy", compares social life to theater, where every person is an "actor" playing a specific social role. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, he argues that people consciously control their behavior to create a certain impression on others. Theater helps harmonize society and shape high moral ideals. Its role is particularly significant in the education of children and youth, as it fosters live communication skills in the digital age (Goffman, 1959).

The Main Functions of Theater (according to T. Kremeshna):

- Cognitive – transmitting social experience across generations and cultures.
- Entertaining – creating a vivid spectacle, incorporating music, scenery, and acting.
- Communicative – serving as a space for social interaction.
- Playful – allowing audiences to immerse themselves in the world of the performance and detach from reality.
- Socializing – shaping individuals through the cultural codes of society (Kremeshna, 2021, p. 104).

T. Kremeshna briefly outlines the history of theater in relation to its social role: in Antiquity, the dramaturgy of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (the fathers of theatrical art) promoted ideas of personal freedom and

patriotism; in the Middle Ages, mystery plays had a religious character, while morality plays propagated ethical norms; during the Renaissance, the works of Shakespeare and Molière reflected social norms and behaviors; in the Age of Enlightenment, dramatists such as Diderot and Voltaire used theater to spread progressive ideas; in Classicism, the works of Corneille and Racine emphasized high moral ideals; in Ukrainian theater, Mykola Gogol called theater a pulpit from which society could be taught, while Mykhailo Hrushevsky saw it as a powerful tool for social cohesion and psychotherapy; Ivan Franko, Borys Hrinchenko, Mykola Voronyi, and others emphasized theater's moral and patriotic potential; today, according to Kremeshna, theater remains a powerful instrument of influence on society, maintaining its aesthetic, social, and educational functions. Due to its visual and symbolic nature, theater shapes values, moral orientations, and aesthetic tastes (Kremeshna, 2012, p. 104–105).

O. Klekovkin, in his dictionary of key theatrical terms *THEATRICA: Lexicon*, describes theater as more than just a stage, actors, or a performance venue. It is a multidimensional concept that includes audience space, artistic processes, cultural phenomena, and a social institution. The word "theater" originates from the Greek *Theatron*, meaning "a place for viewing spectacles". In different cultures, the concept took on unique forms, from ancient tragedies to the theater of the absurd. With language and societal evolution, theater became not only an art form but also a metaphor for various aspects of life – from military actions (theater of war) to scientific research spaces (anatomical theater). In the 6th century BCE, theater emerged as part of religious rituals and later evolved into an independent art form. Greek performances had deep philosophical foundations, as the word *Theatron* is related to *Theoria* (theory), highlighting the connection between intellectual inquiry and theatrical art. Ancient audiences not only sought entertainment but also gained knowledge through symbolic actions performed by actors. Throughout history, theater has played different roles: from a political propaganda tool in Ancient Rome to an educational platform in the Renaissance and Classicism. During the Enlightenment, it became a means of cultural education. In the 19th–20th centuries, it became a platform for social critique and experimentation. With the rise of mass culture, the term "theater" expanded to include various forms, from dramatic and physical theater to shadow and interactive theater. Contemporary theater continues to evolve, responding to social and technological challenges. It extends beyond the stage, integrates into the digital space, and engages audiences in interactive experiences. Today, theater is not just entertainment – it shapes social values, provokes discussion, and reflects global transformations. From classical productions to interactive performances, theater remains a tool for communication, self-expression, and social dialogue. Thus, theater is not just a performance – it is a living, dynamic system that evolves alongside society, shaping cultural space and public consciousness (Klekovkin, 2012, p. 468–474).

Modern theater is a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond the stage and actively responds to social changes. It competes with digital technologies, adapts to new communication formats, and retains its role as a tool for understanding reality. However, such a trajectory carries the risks of chasing trends, superficiality, and catering to an undiscerning audience – and if theater loses its depth of meaning, it risks becoming just another

entertainment product in a world of endless spectacles (Panasuk, & Yudova-Romanova, 2023, p. 44–45).

Theater is not just an art form but also a powerful socio-cultural phenomenon that regulates social processes, conveys values, and contributes to societal harmony. Its historical evolution demonstrates that theater has always reflected social processes, influenced the formation of social norms, and remained a key instrument of education, socialization, and communication.

Discussion and conclusions

Analyzing contemporary theater in Ukraine through the lens of the three key criteria of a cultural institution described by I. Maslikova, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Theater is a regulatory system of values, rules, and norms. Theater undeniably fulfills this function. It not only reflects social processes but also shapes societal norms and values through dramatic art. During the war, Ukrainian theaters have become psychological centers, helping society cope with crises, supporting morale, and reflecting contemporary events. Theatrical productions serve as platforms for social critique, communication between different social groups, and the preservation of cultural traditions and national identity. At the same time, theaters adhere to ethical norms and artistic standards, reinforcing their role in regulating the socio-cultural sphere. For example, the play *Conversations in Tusculum* at the Kyiv Theater on Podil, directed by American playwright and director Richard Nelson. Caesar wins the Battle of Munda against an army led by Pompey's son. Brutus and Cassius, former allies of the Emperor, receive a pardon instead of the death penalty. The conspirators gather in Tusculum, a place near Rome, to discuss what their lives should be like after their defeat. This captivating work explores power and the abuse of power in Ancient Rome, with striking relevance to our own time. *Conversations in Tusculum* reinterprets the tense interactions between Brutus, Cassius, and Cicero that led to the assassination of Julius Caesar – the leader they were once willing to die for, but ultimately became disillusioned with.

- Theater is a stable type of social behavior. Theatrical art is deeply integrated into social interaction, with clearly defined behavioral models: the interaction between actors and audiences; the rituals of theatrical performance; and the formation of social roles through dramatic imagery. Despite challenges, productions continue, exemplified by the staging of *The Witch of Konotop* at the Ivan Franko Theater in early 2023. This play, rooted in Ukrainian literature, has seen sold-out performances, underscoring theater's enduring place in societal behavior.

- Theater is a specialized organization that produces, preserves, and promotes cultural goods. Ukrainian theaters function as cultural institutions that produce and distribute artistic content. Despite wartime challenges, theater groups adapt by adjusting their repertoires, attracting new actors, supporting charitable initiatives, and staging performances for internally displaced persons and the military.

Infrastructure challenges, such as the deteriorating condition of theater buildings in some regions, pose difficulties. However, overall, the theater continues to operate as a cultural institution, not only fulfilling artistic needs but also actively influencing socio-political processes. Notably, the Mariupol Drama Theater, despite being destroyed in March 2022, saw its former members create *Mariupol Drama*, a docu-theater piece recounting their siege experiences. This production has been performed internationally, ensuring the preservation and promotion of Ukrainian cultural narratives.

Theater in Ukraine fully meets all three criteria of a cultural institution. It serves as a regulator of social norms and values, a form of social interaction, and an organized structure that produces and preserves cultural heritage. Challenges such as war, economic instability, and competition with digital media require theaters to develop new approaches and to adapt to changing realities. However, the preservation of the theater's cultural mission and its role as a powerful social instrument affirms its importance as an essential component of societal development.

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ТЕАТР ЯК КУЛЬТУРНИЙ ІНСТИТУТ

В ступ. У 2023–2024 роках Україна, зокрема Київ, переживає театральний ренесанс, незважаючи на війну. Театри стали важливим культурним простором, приваблюючи нову аудиторію та приймаючи постановки європейських режисерів. Водночас є значні виклики, зокрема втрати акторів через мобілізацію, нерівномірна відвідуваність між великими містами та регіональними центрами, а також погрішення стану театральної інфраструктури. Попри зростання відвідуваності театрів у ключових культурних осередках, доступність та заличення аудиторії залишаються нерівномірними по всій країні.

Мета дослідження: Дослідження розглядає театр як культурний інститут, аналізуючи його генезу, функції та місію в контексті сучасних соціокультурних і політичних викликів в Україні.

Методи. Використано міждисциплінарний підхід, що включає: огляд літератури – аналіз наукових праць з театрознавства, культурології та комунікаційних досліджень для визначення ролі театру як соціокультурного інституту; контент-аналіз – дослідження відгуків у соціальних мережах і публікацій для оцінки регіональних відмінностей у відвідуваності театрів та стану інфраструктури.

Результати. Дослідження підтверджує, що український театр відповідає трьом ключовим критеріям культурного інституту. Театр виконує регуляторну функцію, формуючи суспільну свідомість, зберігаючи національну ідентичність і дотримуючись художніх стандартів, особливо у воєнний час. Театр є стабільною формою соціальної поведінки, сприяючи комунікації, залученню аудиторії та психологічній стійкості. Театр виступає як спеціалізована організація, що створює, зберігає та популяризує культурну спадщину, адаптуючись до сучасних викликів. Дослідження підкреслює, що сучасні театри виходять за межі розважальної функції, займаючись соціальною активністю, освітою та психологічною підтримкою.

Висновки. Театр в Україні залишається важливим соціокультурним феноменом, що відображає та впливає на суспільні норми, цінності й колективну стійкість. Водночас нерівномірне заличення регіонів, проблеми інфраструктури та необхідність адаптації до цифрової епохи залишаються актуальними викликами. У міру того як театри долають наслідки війни, їхня здатність балансувати між мистецькою самобутністю та соціальною відповідальністю визначатиме їхню подальшу роль як культурних інститутів.

Ключові слова. театр, культура, культурний інститут, театральне мистецтво, культурна політика, естетика.

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