

THEATRE AND CREATIVE COMMUNICATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF NATIONAL KAUNAS DRAMA THEATRE, LITHUANIA

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Abstract. The article deals with the questions of digital communication and theatre during the lockdown in 2020–2021. With the example of the National Kaunas Drama Theatre, Lithuania, it is revealed that COVID-19 pandemic forced the cultural sector to experiment and use digital products in new conceptual ways. National Kaunas Drama Theatre proposed their audience an online platform *Theatre OnlIne TV* (originally in Lithuanian: *Teatras OnlIne TV*), and developed performances which were adapted to the digital environment of the lockdown period: some of the performances were transmitted on *Zoom Video Communications* platform, especially those for children and adolescents, some of them, such as *The Flickering*, tested new ways of integrating audiences digitally into theatrical action. The latter performance was created for *Facebook* users, lasted for four evenings and invited them to become co-creators of the story. The analysis reveals that digital theatre communication attracted audiences of younger generations and can be a useful creative tool in developing a relationship with the new generation of theatre-goers.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, creative communication, cross-communication, digital communication, digital platforms, digital theatre, National Kaunas Drama Theatre, performances online, public sphere, theatre.

Introduction

The 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic has forced the world at large to adapt to a new reality in which live communication is replaced by digital communication. Although digital communication was already widely practiced in various economic sectors such as commerce, media or telecommunication, the lockdown obliged us to find more creative ways of using the digital in professional life. Organizations, both in the private and public sectors, were immediately introduced to multiple digital means of distance communication, online learning and various programs and apps for distance services were developed.

In this article I shall look closer at how COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown influenced the cultural sector and services, particularly theatre. Formerly theatre was

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considered to be dependent on the spectator's real contact with a real actor at a real time in a concretely defined place. The lockdown and the employment of digital products to connect with audiences began to engage with this paradigm. Using the example of National Kaunas Drama Theatre (NKDT), I shall argue that the introduction of digital communication in theatre changes the existing paradigm of experiencing theatre and opens it to more dynamic ways of communication and audience perception.

1. Methodology

Debates regarding digital transformation and communication intensified with the development of social networking platforms at the beginning of the 21st century. Many of them invert the questions around the structural societal changes these platforms determine (Whyte, 2018; Nichols & Stornaiuolo, 2019; Feroz et al., 2021). These changes are often analyzed within the conceptual frame of the Habermasian public sphere. The notion of the public sphere was introduced by Habermas (1991) into public discourse in 1962 and has gained momentum over the past decades. Numerous researchers use the term in analyzing the impact of digital communication on society (Benson, 2009; Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, 2017; Rasmussen, 2008, 2013; Emden & Midgley, 2015). This impact mostly concerns the political public sphere and media communication, but is also important in such domains as environment, health care (Feroz et al., 2021) and educational systems (Williamson, 2017).

Theatre as a cultural institution is part of this discourse. Theatre has for many years been a domain of political and societal discussion (Balme, 2014). This field of communication was later expanded by the printed press, and still later by radio and television, which in turn are affected by current technological development. New means of communication do not nevertheless diminish the role theatre continues to play in Western societies in which it remains not only a field of artistic and aesthetic research, but also an arena in which political and societal debate continues to proliferate (Klavis, 2015).

The question is rather whether theatre is capable, as actually radio and television are, of adapting to current means of communication in order to reach new audiences or to satisfy the needs of the existing ones. For a long time theatre experimented with technological devices that would be used on stage, such as lighting, sound and video. Although some performance groups, such as *Rimini Protokoll* or *Blast Theory*, have integrated digital communication in their performances for more than a decade, such theatrical communication still remains experimental (Giannachi, 2004; Dixon, 2007) and is not the primary concern of theatre people. Being related to real time and space, theatre considers itself a unique medium, the existence of which is entirely based on liveliness, on the interaction between stage and audience in real time and space (Brook, 2019).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown initiated an engagement with this paradigm and new possibilities for theatre are being revealed and discussed (Kolsteeg, 2020; Dias Leite et al., 2020). The lockdown highlighted the fact that audiences behind the screens are able and keen to communicate with theatre via Internet platforms (Kolsteeg, 2020). How did it happen that theatre audiences so easily accept the new communicative reality? Who are the main target groups waiting for the new connections with theatre?

Citing the example of NKDT, we shall search for responses to the questions raised above. The first part of the article will be dedicated to the analysis of the digital platforms the theatre uses for communication with audiences. In the second part we shall discuss how theatre integrates digital products into the aesthetic fabrics of a performance and how this integration inscribes itself in the field of digital theatre.

NKDT was chosen out of thirteen Lithuanian state theatres for the analysis because it offers on the one hand significantly more online communication products than other Lithuanian theatres, on the other hand, the offered products can be considered as prototypes of theatre products in the future (Koleva et al., 2021). The period of analysis covers the first lockdown of spring, 2020 and the second lockdown from October, 2020 until April, 2021. Our presumption is that performances integrating digital communication reach primarily audiences of Generation Y. This generation is defined by scholars as those born between 1981 and 1999: they are the first generation to have spent their entire lives in the digital environment and it affects their live and work styles (Bolton et al., 2013, p. 246). Consequently, this generation introduces their children – Generation Z, to the same communication practices, and thus accustom them to new theatre experiences.

2. Digital platforms

Theatre communication via digital platforms can be regarded as a public sphere, where institutional communicative spaces facilitate public discussions and the formation of public opinion (Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, 2017, p. 101). It can also be perceived as part of the already existing marketing tools and thus a means of manipulation and economization (Osssewaarde, 2019). In this chapter we shall offer an overview of the digital platforms used by theatre for communication and will determine their impact on audiences.

To obtain the necessary data, an overview of theatre digital communication platforms was made. This overview indicated that theatre uses global platforms such as *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Instagram*, *LinkedIn*. As the analysis demonstrates, *Facebook* is one of the most important digital communication means for theatre, as other means of communication, such as *YouTube*, *Instagram* or *LinkedIn* attract significantly smaller audiences. *YouTube* was launched in 2010 and drew almost 0.5 million views during the last ten years, however, it counted only 813 subscribers in April, 2021. This number indicates that *YouTube* as a channel for video production, is less recruited than other means of communication, such as *Facebook*, the theatre Internet page or the platforms of the partners. *Instagram* attracted less than 2000 followers and *LinkedIn* only 45. *Facebook* counts around 25 000 followers and is the main channel for social networking. As the numbers demonstrate, engagement via *YouTube* or *Instagram* is not substantial, and the most popular platform for the young, *TikTok* is not used at all.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, communication via the above-listed platforms suggests that theatre faces important communication challenges caused by disruptive communication predetermined by the development of digital platforms (Feroz et al., 2021). The multiplicity of communication means used by the audiences and the constantly changing communication habits of different age groups, imply organizational changes in value creation. To communicate with younger audiences via *Instagram* or *TikTok* the theatre would need specialists who

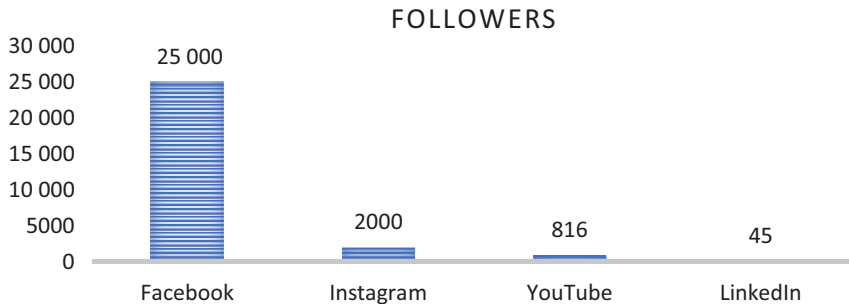


Figure 1. Numbers of followers on social networks in National Kaunas Drama Theatre, Lithuania. April, 2021 (source: created by author)

would specialize in creative communication via those means. However, there is a lack of such specialists at this theatre, as is also the case in Lithuanian theatres in general.

One of the attempts to create new value for audiences was the creation of the independent digital platform named *Theatre Online TV* (YouTube, 2022). Created in 2016, the platform was used occasionally and did not serve as a means of attracting wider and more varied audiences. The first edition, an interview with the general director of the theatre, attracted 2200 viewers. Later the number of the presentations online varied from 600 to 4600 viewers. During the first three years, the theatre produced only 9 online programs. One can presume that the theatre had a vision of transmitting theatre to larger audiences through digital means, however, this vision was not realized.

A more elaborate and multifaceted use of the platform was achieved in April, 2020, when the theatre had to close because of the lockdown and was obliged to find a more appropriate means of communication with audiences. The communication team subsequently developed the visual style of the platform and began to group its online shows thematically. As the analysis of the titles of the themes indicates, this grouping was not developed thoroughly enough. It was difficult for the viewer to understand whether there were certain days when the theatre presented only news, or if there were specific days for family theatre or certain days when one could delve into the archives of the theatre. During the first two months of the lockdown, the theatre made the most of the platform, however, the team was unable to come to a clear decision as to how to consistently present the themes. The theatre delivered 17 online programs during those two months; at least two programs per week. The number of viewers, which varied from 420 to 5200 viewers per program, testifies that they were engaging even though these programs were not grouped. The main subjects were: 1. performances online; 2. variety programs and education online.

3. Performances online

As the analysis demonstrates, performances adapted for online format secured most of the audience's attention. One of the most engaging was the performance for children *Run-away Hare* (originally in Lithuanian: *Kiškis pabėgėlis*, 2018, director Agnė Sunklodaitė) with 5200 views and 12 comments. One can presume that parents spending all their time with

children at home needed to entertain them and theatre online helped them to maintain a positive psychological and emotional well-being as well as strengthen family bonds (Bolton et al., 2013).

On the other hand, this performance succeeded in engaging children and their parents because the creative team found a suitable way to communicate with screen-bound audiences. It was not a filmed version of a stage performance as is usually the case, but a performance adapted for the Internet. Children could see the actors' faces while they performed in front of their computer cameras but as if in a *Zoom Video Communications* conference or in a radio theatre where there are no scenery, sound, or lighting effects. Thus, an impression of a closer communication between a character and a spectator was created, although paradoxically one would have expected a physical distancing because of the screen interface. The creative team used another successful method of approaching the Internet audience: they organized an Internet discussion after the performance and responded to the questions that the audience was asking on the *Facebook* comments section. This discussion was curated by the director of the performance Sunklodaitė and allowed children to better understand the work of the actors and the mechanism of the creation of a performance (see Figures 2–3).

Other performances adapted for the computer interface were: *I Was Flying, Flying* (originally in Lithuanian: *Lė-kiau-lė-kiau*, 2018, director Eglė Kižaitė), a play for adolescents written by Daiva Čepauskaitė, and *The Slipped Disc* (originally in Lithuanian: *Bestuburiada*, 2019, director Aldona Vilutytė), an adaptation of a play *Slipped Disc: A Study of the Upright Walk* (originally in German: *Bandscheibenvorfall – Ein Abend für Leute mit Haltungsschäden*, 2013, first published in 2002) written by Ingrid Lausund. The first attracted 2800 views and elicited

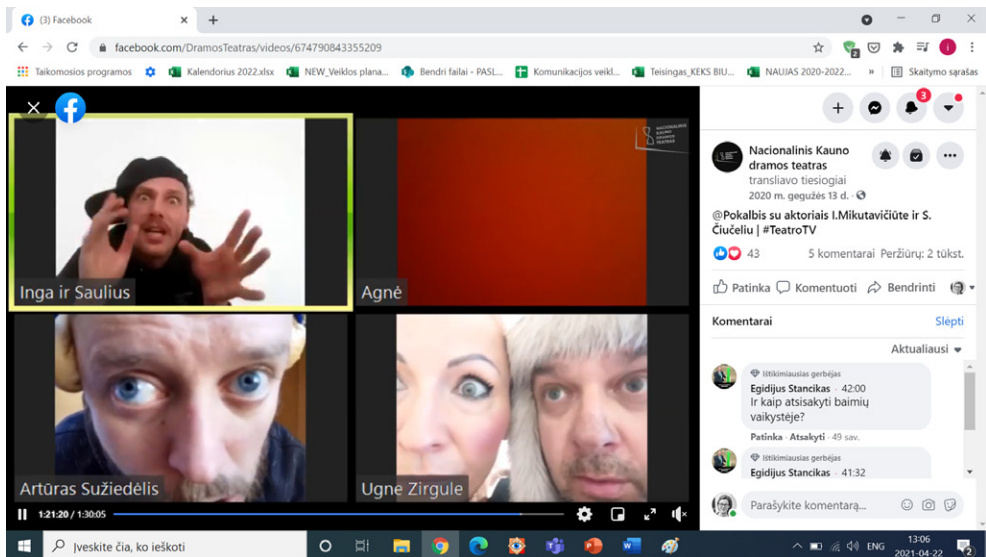


Figure 2. Performance *Runaway Hare*, adapted for digital communication platform. Screenshot in April, 2021 (source: created by author)

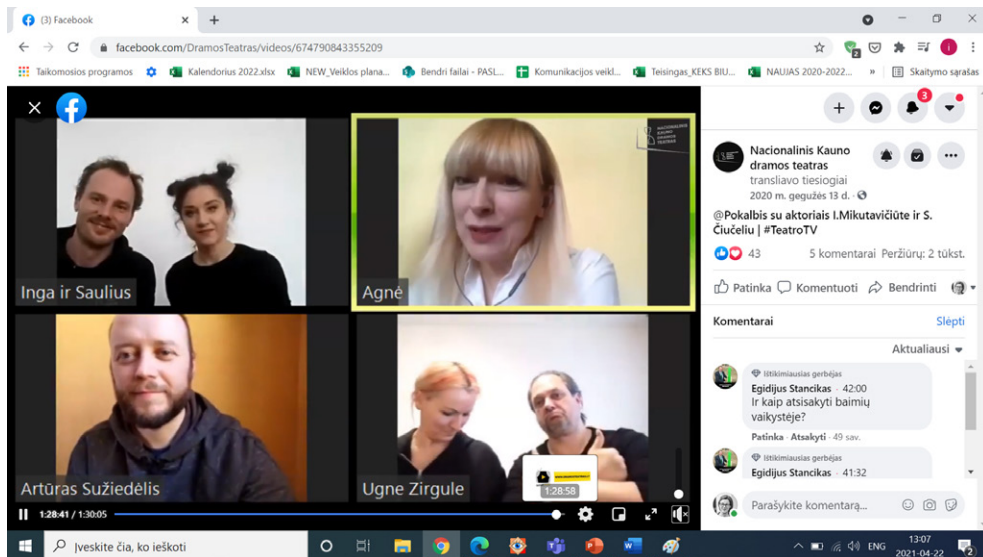


Figure 3. Online discussion after the performance *Runaway Hare*. Screenshot in April, 2021 (source: created by author)

20 comments, whereas the second attracted 2000 page-views and only 2 comments. The fact that the performance for adolescents elicited comments and likes presumes that Internet performances could be a suitable form for this complicated and rebellious audience of adolescents. One should also keep in mind that the theatre live-streamed this performance not only on its platform but also via the Internet platform of its communication partner *15min.lt* (2020). This cross-communication secured more than 1000 page-views. Therefore, with one live stream and choosing the appropriate communication partner, the theatre reached an audience that otherwise would have been reached only after about seven live performances.

Another example worth noting is the transmission of an archive performance *Crime and Punishment* (originally in Lithuanian: *Nusikaltimas ir bausmė*, 2004, director Gintaras Varnas), an adaptation of the famous novel with the same title (originally in Russian: *Prestupléniiye i nakazániye*, 2001, first published in 1866) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. This performance attracted 4200 page-views and 60 likes. One should note that the performance is more than four hours long and was filmed more than fifteen years ago. It was not adapted for the needs of the actual spectator and the technical realization in comparison with the possibilities of today was poor. There are several reasons why it attracted the attention of the Internet audience. Firstly, the possibility to view a compressed version of Dostoyevsky's novel (two volumes to read otherwise) that is in the school reading program, secondly, the possibility of viewing one of the best performances of the epoch with the young Gytis Ivanauskas (born in 1980, actually, the star of the television show business) in the main role and thus to become better acquainted with the history of this theatre. Finally, it was the only possibility for a spectator to see a performance that no longer exists.

Overall, performances online succeeded in attracting the attention of younger audiences and maintaining their interest in theatre. The lockdown encouraged the creators to experiment with new communication and performance formats and the *Zoom Video Communications* platform became an integrated part of performance creation. It allowed actors who were isolating at home to communicate and to act together and thus to maintain an active relationship with the audiences behind the screens.

4. Variety programs and education online

As the analysis indicates, NKTD used some of its actors and employees as promoters and offered them the theatre online platform as a platform for variety programs and education. The *Friday Night Show* (in Lithuanian: *Penktadienio vakaro šou*, 2020) created and presented by the young actor Gintautas Bejeris (born in 1983, reached 4100 viewers, had 27 comments and 68 likes. His next *Saturday Night Show* in Lithuanian: *Šeštadienio vakaro šou*, 2020) attracted 2600 page-views, 149 comments and 42 likes. It comprised quizzes for the audience and transmission of a mix of techno-style music. Many of the comments were written by theatre colleagues who engaged quite actively in the game thus becoming a component of the project. Another quizz competition, organized for the occasion of World Theatre Day, attracted 2200 page-views and 45 likes. Bearing in mind that representatives of all Kaunas, Lithuania, theatres were taking part in the program, the number of viewers was low.

A concert and poetry readings dedicated to the heroes of COVID-19 pandemic attracted 5600 page-views and 133 likes. A further event, Mother's Day, allowed actors to transmit virtual greetings to their mothers via the Internet. The program achieved 3900 page-views and 127 likes. The concert from the theatre's balcony attracted 2000 Internet viewers and 54 likes. This concert was cross-communicated in the partnership with *What's New in Kaunas* (originally in Lithuanian: *Kas vyksta Kaune*, 2021), an Internet platform for news from Kaunas. A program created for the celebration of the centenary of the theatre attracted 8500 viewers, 18 comments and 192 likes. One can presume that this high number was achieved because of the cross-communication with partners; Kaunas agency of tourism *It's Kaunastic* (2021) and an application software *Walk#15*. In comparison, another program dedicated to the celebration of the centenary and including the greetings of the directors of the biggest three Lithuanian theatres but not transmitted on partner channels achieved only 3800 page-views, 17 comments and 117 likes.

Seven virtual excursions were organized during October–December, 2020. There was an excursion dedicated to seniors (October, 2020, 2900 page-views, 32 comments and 57 likes), an excursion with an actor showing how he prepares for a role (November, 2020, 3500 page-views, 26 comments and 194 likes), an excursion with props creator (November, 2020, 1600 page-views) and an excursion with the props manager (December, 2020, 1300 page-views). One program was dedicated to the promotion of a new performance and was guided by one of the actors in the performance (December, 2020, 1900 page-views). It is also important to note that NKDT was one of the few to organize debates around the challenges that theatres were facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These debates attracted on average about 2800 page-views.

The above-mentioned examples suggest that NKDT was intensively testing its online platform during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring, 2020 and less intensively during the second wave at the end of 2020. However, the strategic purposes of the platform were not identified and the theatre neither used this platform for generating income nor for attracting significantly larger audiences. As the experience of other cultural institutions demonstrates, NKDT is not the only cultural institution that struggled with these challenges. As Kolsteeg (2020, p. 15) pointed out: “realising audience engagement [...] is central, if not the central, challenge in the development of new, digital cultural formats”.

Statistical results concerning audience engagement at NKDT suggest that this online platform could be successfully used for attracting children and adolescent audiences. To achieve these audiences, the theatre should promote the platform more vigorously. The results also indicate that when NKDT cross-communicated its content through the platforms of its communication partners, greater audience engagement numbers were achieved, so another suggestion would be to collaborate with communication partners specializing in attracting audiences from the younger generation.

It should also be noted that online programs attracted more audiences than the theatre would have been capable of attracting to live performances. NKDT can accommodate between 100 and 500 spectators per evening in real theatre spaces, whereas an online transmission attracted from 600 to 8400 viewers. It may be concluded therefore that a digital platform is an important extension for attracting dispersed audiences in distant places. Besides, the online platform allows for watching programs at any convenient time, there are no time restrictions for watching a theatre program and thus more audiences can be reached.

A further positive aspect of the platform was that it gave actors the possibility to promote themselves and to continue doing their creative work. Actors had to become accustomed to playing in front of computer cameras, engage in discussions more openly with audiences behind the screens and search for novel performance forms. Consequently, audiences could engage with a more personal image of an actor. As Robinson (2021, p. 44) noted, “Corona provided an incentive to connection, for both institution and community, a first meeting and mutual understanding at eye level, a recognition”. The production of the online programs was discontinued at the end of 2020. However, it brought NKDT to a new phase of research on digital creation and the theatre offered their audiences two new digital performances in March, 2021.

5. Digital theatre

Digital theatre is part of a larger theatre discourse concerning experimentations with both real and virtual spaces and bodies. These experimentations began in the first half of the 20th century, with Erwin Piscator and Vsevolod Meyerhold who used film technics in their creations (Piscator, 1968; Picon-Vallin, 1999). Later, film technics were augmented by other technical devices. Assemblages of real bodies, voices and machine generated processes which were dubbed virtual theatre, cyborg theatre (Giannachi, 2004), or viral theatre (Felton-Dansky, 2018). With the development of digital social networks and the possibility of interactive relationships between actor and spectator, the notion of digital theatre accrues new connotations.

To present NKDT's performances *Spaced Away* (originally in Lithuanian: *Ryšys*, 2021, director Agnija Leonova) and *The Flickering* (originally in Lithuanian: *Mirgėjimas*, 2021, director Augustas Gornatkevičius) we shall employ Masura's (2020) definition of digital theatre. She identifies the following traits related to digital theatre: an interactive message between audience members and performers, a verbal communication containing either spoken language or text, a public space (not necessarily physical) shared by performers and audience, and a digital technology which is central to the existence of the performance. Although both performances were created for digital platforms, they demonstrate two different approaches to the digital: *Spaced Away* is based on a traditional frontal communication with a spectator behind the screen and does not invite him/her to immerse into the fictional world of the performance, whereas *The Flickering* gives spectators the opportunity to be part of the performance or, rather, of the digital experience.

Spaced Away, realized by Leonova, is a performance based on Fokin's (2016) science fiction story *Fire* (originally in Russian: *Ogon*) about people confronting death while travelling between different planets. Leonova uses digital space as a visual expansion of a traditional theatre set and together with the scenographer Irina Komissarova and visual artist Artis Dzērve, creates graphic and visual landscapes that serve as a surreal background for the actors. As the performance is based on the traditional storytelling method and there is no interaction between the character and the spectator, the latter feels as if she/he was in a traditional theatre or seeing a filmed version of a performance visually adapted for the television screen. This suggests that the performance offers no space for the audience and thus neglects the new reality of the audience desire to connect with and be part of an action. Paraphrasing Kolsteeg we could agree, that "the value of art is found in how it connects to people's life-world" (2020, p. 19) and that today's interest is in "observing how art digitally connects to the digital/creative living world that the majority of art consumers is already very much at home in" (2020, p. 19). This performance however does not offer such a possibility and does not engage audiences facing the screen.

The Flickering, realized by Gornatkevičius, approaches the new reality more relevantly and uses methods that are common to art consumers nowadays. The creative team were challenged to look for new ways of creating performances on digital platforms and joined the group of artists that delve

"deeper into the full potentiality of these media to create multi-sensorial and immersive performances that – instead of trying to emulate the venture of physically going to the theatre – actually recreate new forms of aesthetic experience, transposing the theatrical pact to a different reality of execution and instituting new ways of presence, independently of physical closeness" (Dias Leite et al., 2020, p. 39).

The Flickering is a performance created for the *Facebook* platform and can be accessed only on this social network. It was created by a group of young artists who work in the cross-disciplinary environment and therefore are more interested in combining various media than creating performances based on the protocols of traditional theatre. The concept of a digital performance demanded skills that were not previously required in theatre. Firstly, the dramaturgy or the script had to be co-created with the audiences during the performance. The latter could modify the development of the action in writing and discussion in the

comments section. Actors participating in the performance had to react to these comments and thus were obliged to improvise in their written responses.

The dramaturgy of the digital performance was based on a discussion around the pros and cons of the use of light-emitting diode lighting in our everyday life. This discussion was animated at the beginning of the experience by a small community of theatre people who were arguing between themselves and thus provoking the audience to take part. This community consisted not only of actors participating in the performance, but also of writers and other theatre community members. Together with the actors they sustained the story and activated its development; without them, the experience would have been impossible. In this case, the written communication skills and the capacity to improvise while writing were more important than the performing skills of an actor.

To experience the performance, a participant was required to join *The Flickering Facebook* group to be able to view the written or the filmed action on the group page. The experience lasted four evenings, one hour each evening and members of the group were free to attend, to engage with it via comments or to leave wherever they wished. As the data on the *Facebook* group page indicates, there were about 20 participants per performance. The reflections following the performance demonstrate that during the first evening, spectators observed the action in order to understand the rules of the game (Vilnelé, 2021). During the second evening, they began to engage actively in discussions without caring much about the real moderators of the performance, that is the actors and the script moderators. The third evening revealed that regardless of the impression that spectators were having an impact on the action, the development of the story was still in the hands of the moderators. Spectators could finally understand which comments were written by their fellow participants and which belonged to the characters of the play. The fourth evening revealed the sources of the conflicts between the characters. Finally, the participants were invited to reflect critically on the use of social media in everyday life and the manipulative environments it created.

As we see, *The Flickering* corresponds to the notion of digital theatre as described by Masura. In addition, it integrates gamification strategy into the concept of the performance and thus creates a new performance prototype adapted for audiences at home. According to previous research, one needs from two to five years to understand if a prototype can have a measurable impact on the society (d'Alancaisez, 2021) so, for the moment this impact is not under discussion.

Discussions and conclusions

COVID-19 pandemic necessitated an innovative rethink by NKDT with regard to strategies for approaching home based audiences. During the first lockdown, the theatre experimented with the already existing communication platforms and particularly used their own digital platform *Theatre OnLine TV* (YouTube, 2022). The analysis suggests that this platform can be a positive means of creative communication with younger audiences as well as millennials and Generation Z and for that to happen, the theatre should promote the platform more actively within this target group. As the above-given examples indicate, cross-communication is an important factor for the dissemination of theatre products for larger audiences surfing in

the digital arena. The platform opens pathways for actors to search for new audience approaches and innovative performance techniques. This experimentation was tested in-depth during the second lockdown when the theatre chose to create more sustainable digital products used not only for communication but also for generating income. *The Flickering* corresponds to the expectations of the audience active on social networks and may be regarded as a successful example of digital theatre with gamification aspirations.

COVID-19 pandemic presented our society with new and unfamiliar challenges. It obliged us to reframe our daily routine and brought novel creative experiences that shift our habits and propose new ways of communication, especially of creative communication. The questions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on society are widely discussed in different fields. Regarding culture, political discussions on the European Union level are important. They indicate that transformations in post-COVID-19 pandemic times are inevitable and insist that innovations, related to new and creative forms of communication and live styles will be crucial to protect the overall being of individuals and to prepare the society for future pandemics and crisis. The recent situation taps “into the shift in political and citizen consciousness” (Dixson-Declèv et al., 2021, p. 5) and thus opens ways for the creation of “new eco-systems for collaboration, organizational structures and procedures” (Dixson-Declèv et al., 2021, p. 7). It seems that after this experience it will be difficult to return to former, long-established modes of communication. In addition, the researchers predict that the expectations and interests of the audience will most likely differ (Bouwman, 2020). Therefore theatre creators will be forced to continue experimenting with new ways of creative communication and thus adapt to the needs of the new generation of theatre-goers.

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