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Towards a New Popular Theatre (?). Reflections After the Completions of *UBUmaterial* Performative Archive on *Instagram*

Summary

The article describes the building of *UBUmaterial* performative archive on *Instagram* during the COVID-19 lockdown by Papalangki Theatre Company in Greece (2020–2021). Through an innovative format, *UBUmaterial* started as the attempt of three actors-narrators isolated due to pandemic to rehearse and somehow present *Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry. However, exploring the *Instagram* and play's potentialities, the three actors soon would be transformed into narrators of their own effort, using their households and adopting a commenting stance on their everyday situation. Thus, the dramaturgy of *UBUmaterial*'s posts (videos) integrated most of the traditional popular theatre's features and strategies. After a reflection on the contemporary meaning of "popularity" in theatre/performance, the article suggests that *UBUmaterial* (as well as other digital forms of theatre) may be considered a form of modern popular theatre.

Keywords: performative, archive, *Instagram*, *UBUmaterial*, popular theatre, *Ubu Roi*.

PRETĪ JAUNAM POPULĀRAJAM TEĀTRIM (?). PĀRDOMAS PĒC *UBUmaterial* PERFORMANČU ARHĪVA IZVEIDOŠANAS *INSTAGRAM* VIETNĒ

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā apskatīta Grieķijas Papalangki teātra kompānijas *UBUmaterial* iestudējuma arhīva veidošana *Instagram* vietnē COVID-19 izolācijas laikā (2020–2021). *UBUmaterial* aizsākās kā triju aktieru stāstnieku, kas pandēmijas dēļ atradās izolācijā, centieni inovatīvā formātā iestudēt un kaut kādā veidā parādīt skatītājiem Alfrēda Žarī (*Alfred Jarry*) lugu *Ubu Roi* (*Karalis Ibī*)*.* Tomēr, apgūstot *Instagram* un lugas potenciālās iespējas, trīs aktieri drīz vien kļuva par pašu dzīves stāstniekiem, izmantojot savas mājsaim-niecības un kļūstot par ikdienas situāciju komentētājiem. Tādējādi *Instagram* vietnē publicēto *UBUmaterial* video dramaturģija integrēja lielāko daļu tradicionālā populārā teātra iezīmju un stratēģiju. Pēc pārdomām par „popularitātes" mūsdienu nozīmi teātrī/performancē, rakstā secināts, ka *UBUmaterial* (tāpat kā citas teātra digitālās formas) var tikt uzskatīts par populārā teātra moderno formu.

Raksturvārdi: performatīvs, arhīvs, *Instagram*, *UBUmaterial*, populārais teātris, *Ubu Roi*.

Introduction

This article's title is in part borrowed from an often-quoted essay by the theatre researcher David Mayer called "Towards A Definition of Popular Theatre" (Mayer 1977). In his article, Mayer, trying to invent a cohesive definition for popular theatre, argues that "it is probably easier and more profitable to describe various popular theatre genres than to define what we mean by the term popular theatre" (Mayer 1977: 257). And he may be right. Because defining "theatre" and "performance" is already a harsh job (Goldberg 2001: 9); the attempt to also enclose "popular" into epistemological boundaries may be exhausting since popularity as a theatrical term is at the same time comprehensive and diverse (McCormik 1993: 1). It integrates several meanings and forms, and it depends upon historical time and place. It considers particular social, political, and economic circumstances, and it has become synonymous, in historical avant-garde theatre, with some of the most innovative aesthetic searches. Thus, to demonstrate this epistemological uncertainty, but also the ambiguity of new digital forms of theatre – on which the discussion has just begun, including even the question if they belong to the realm of theatre or not –, summarising, in other words, the fact that our aspect necessarily moves between a historical overview of the term "popular" and a "presentism" (Pavis 2013: 240), unable to predict future developments and/or swifts on the digital theatre field, a question mark follows the tile.

What used to be popular theatre

For several hundred years, [Western] popular theatre genres did not really care to be characterised as such. John McCormick argues that "[the 19th-century French popular theatre] did not need to justify its existence" (McCormick 1993: 227). Popular theatre genres just continued to be performed across the continent and to entertain a diverse population, usually deriving from lower classes (Schechter 2003: 4). Among popular theatre practitioners, we should include mimes, pantomimes, puppeteers, shadow theatre animators, circus clowns, various spectacles', and religious mysteries' performers, but especially, since the Renaissance, commedia dell arte's theatre groups. The latter, excluded from official theatrical spaces (if these spaces existed at all) and enjoying a remarkably lower social status than their official colleagues, used to tour from town to town, to settle their primitive sets from fairgrounds to squares (Hildy, Wilson 2015: 232–233), and to present their more elaborate although always improvised performances to audiences, which were also excluded from institutionalized – or, in a few centuries, "civil"-ised" – places of theatrical entertainment.

Demonstrating high acting skills and incorporating the audience's reactions into their simplistic scenarios, they used to challenge local secular and church authorities with biting comments or songs full of sexual and scandalous implications. Through their presence, the open and public spaces, similarly to ancient "agoras" (and this idea will be repeated by Romain Rolland when he suggests that "our popular theatre is necessarily reduced to the perspective of the Greek theatre" (Rolland 2003: 113 [our translation])), not only they could be given a performative dimension, but they could also be transformed into places of class consciousness, political dispute, and revolution against every kind of power.

Reflections on what is or could be popular theatre emerged during the historical avant-garde period (late 19th and early 20th century) when innovative theatre directors and scholars were looking for a way to deliberate theatre practice from the institutionalised naturalism and "revitalize theatre" (Brook 1969: 68). Bourgeois naturalistic (and its "light" version, realistic) theatre and drama, with its "fourth wall" and its psychological characters – but also with the help of the emerging professional directing, which, from now on, will exclusively immure and guide the spectator's gaze – seemed unable to avoid "an intellectualism that was seen pretentious, a reliance on words that came to be considered the chief device of hypocrisy, and an estheticism that rejected political statement" (Shank 1974: 110). But the most important for these innovators such as Vsevolod Meyerhold (see, for example, Meyerhold 1912) or Edward Gordon Craig (see, for example, Craig 1908) was to re-invent an unbroken and non-intermediated relation with the audience; in other words, to bridge a rupture, which, at their times, seemed inherent, between the scene and the auditorium, the actors and the audience, the based on the drama performance and the actual (and changeable) political and social situation. They attempted, as Marie Denizot says, "to unite in the space of theatrical representation the whole of society" (Denizot 2010: 9). And, to go even further, especially after Bertolt Brecht's experiments, they seek, through popular forms of theatre, to restore a relation between audience and show, which could be capable of pushing the spectators into a specific political (re-)action. Summarising these ideas, Dario Fo, a Nobel Prize winner exactly for his work on the commedia's and medieval mysteries' recreation, will say: "The choice of an improvisational form of theatre is already a political one – because improvisational theatre is never finished, never a closed case, always open-ended." (Fisher 1992: 52–53)

Today, if we should recognise performance as "popular", we may say that it should be "publicly supported, highly visual and physical, portable, orally transmitted, readily understood, not flattering to wealth or tyranny; and for

these reasons, as well as for low or no admission cost" (Schechter 2003: 4), it should be widely appreciated by an "unsophisticated audience" (McNamara 1974: 3). It is also widely considered that in popular theatre, "subtlety and conventional good taste are usually secondary to action, fantasy, and physicality [and] the script of a popular theatre piece is often little more than a scenario or framework for improvisation, comic business, and spectacular effects" (McNamara 1974: 4).

But popular theatre is also identified as political theatre, which, in its turn, "adopted the spirit of fun" (Shank 1974: 111), and it is hoped by the activist that "it could somehow address specific social antagonisms" (Thurston 1998: 8). Pascal Ory believes that the "citizen" theatre [he also does not use the term "popular" because of its implications are "too highly debatable"] is a forum of democracy" (Ory 1995: 13). Away from Émile Copfermann's provocative warning that "popular theatre can – rather than becoming a critical conscience – act as a form of social adaptation and acquiescence to the values of repressive society" (Copfermann 1965: 8), we accept here that popular theatre may offer opportunities for dialogue "not only on stage or within the audience, but equally between the two" (Wardhaugh 2017: 11). In addition, in Brecht's perspective, popularity is in fact an aesthetic desideratum, and it may deliver political emancipation. For Brecht, theatre should be "intelligible to the broad masses, taking over their forms of expression and enriching them, adopting and consolidating their standpoint, representing the most progressive section of the people in such a way that it can take over the leadership" (Brecht 1964: 108). Respectively, according to Romain Rolland, popular theatre's aesthetics is a tool for the political education of the people, because they "must be relieved of the humiliating position they have been assigned in the theatre for centuries: a servant hidden behind the door, watching through the keyhole the gestures of his masters, with a bad curiosity, sly and fearful" (Rolland 2003: 115–116).

This primacy of the aesthetic dimensions of popular theatre, which subsequently led to political outcomes, was challenged with the emergence of the then-new mass media. McNamara, during the 1970s, argued that "many of these traditional popular forms have been absorbed into or replaced by radio, films, and television, the media of contemporary mass culture" (McNamara 1974: 3). His opinion met that of Eric Bentley, who had argued that "while high theater has a harder time than any other high art, the popular theater, dedicated to entertainment, and today functioning on the screen and over the air, is perpetually the most flourishing of the arts" (Bentley 1967: 233). It was indirectly debated by Mazzoni-Clementi and Hill, who supported that commedia's performances were actually "custom-tailored for a specific

audience", and, so, "had television existed in the Renaissance, commedia might have died an early death" (Mazzoni-Clementi, Hill 2003: 85), agreeing with Roland Barthes, who will argue on the "body-fetish" in popular puppetry (Barthes 1971: 79). Although Schechter tries to compromise these different aspects, saying that "there is no minimum number of bodies required to make theatre popular" (Schechter 2003: 7), perhaps he (not less than the others) would be surprised by the extent of diffusion, but also of potentialities that contemporary digital media provide, respecting popularity, but also liveness and inter-action, and which was fully and necessarily unfolded during the COVID-19 global lockdown (2020–2021).

What may be popular theatre today

The internet and new media explosion during the 21st century met with an unprecedented development of digital modes of theatre and performance. Digital theatre, cyberformances, networked performances, telematic per-formances, virtual theatre, internet theatre, cyberdrama, and hyperformance (Papagiannouli 2016: xi) flooded the "cyberspace", opening new perspec-tives in performing arts and connecting audiences and spectacles, which otherwise would never have the chance to meet each other. The variety in terms defining these new performative genres reveals not only the present, and future, potentialities of these practices, but also the changing nature of this artistic field (and, consequently, of the subsequent scientific discourse), where "the computer does give rise to unique artistic modes of expression and new generic forms of networked and interactive performance" (Dixon 2007: 37). Away from Patrice Pavis's pessimism, who denied the compa-tibility and the equivalence of digitality and theatre, stating that "technology has got the upper hand on the human for good" (Pavis 2003: 188), we tend to agree with Murray who asserts: "Computers are arenas for social experience and dramatic interaction, a type of media more like public theater, and their output is used for qualitative interaction, dialogue and conversation" (Murray 1997: 15); and, moreover, with Papagiannouli who sees digital theatre "not only as a type of entertainment but also as a social art, and consequently as a political act" (Papagiannouli 2016: 17).

From November 2020 until April 2021, Papalangki Theatre Company (Greece) conceived, planned, executed, and presented *UBUmaterial*, a performative archive on *Instagram*. In *UBUmaterial*, three actors-narrators, isolated due to the COVID-19 lockdown, were exploring Alfred Jarry's (1873–1907) *Ubu Roi*[1] at home, rehearsing via *Zoom*, shooting (and editing)

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[1] Alfred Jarry's play and information about the author in Latvian is accessible at: https://www.kroders.lv/uploads/story/pdf_11.pdf

short videos and posting them on *Instagram*, building piece by piece an innovative format of digital performance. Sometimes, and using *Instagram* tools, *UBUmaterial* was broadcasted live, but always moving beyond the logic of live (or not live) streaming, a common practice during the lockdown that was attempting to "fit" the traditional theatre within the narrow confines of the screen. On the contrary, in *UBUmaterial*, we decided to use digital media for what they really are: channels of information and communication running across the globe, connecting people, influencing decisions, and raising questions. Functioning as a digital archive of performative videos fragmented in "episodes" and, at the same time, as its own (archival) documentation, *UBUmaterial* benefited from the polymorphic possibilities for interconnection and interaction with an indefinite audience that *Instagram* provides. The archive's aim was (and still is) to remain visible forever and available for derived use, integrated into one of the largest archives of visual information in the world, *Instagram*.
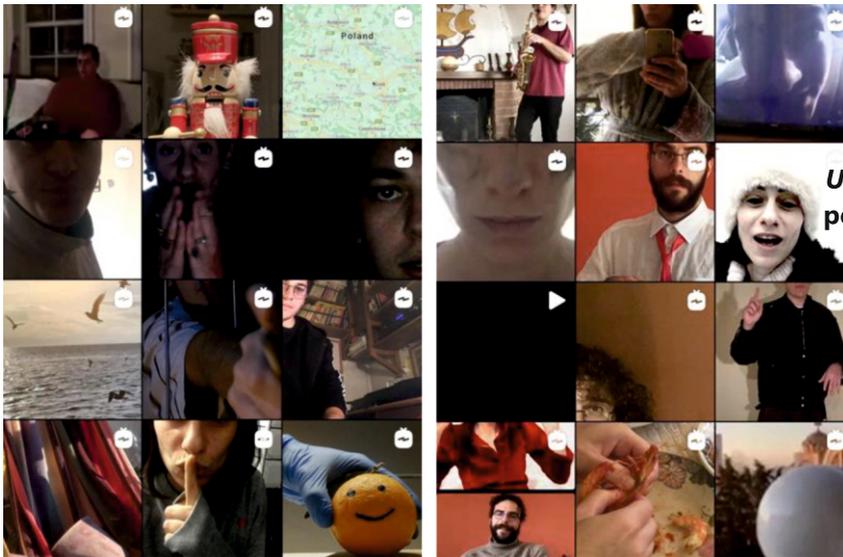

Figure 1.

UBUmaterial* performative archive's structure on *Instagram

Ubu Roi by Alfred Jarry was meant to be the Papalangki Theatre's new production during the 2020–2021 season, but the COVID-19 lockdown cancelled the plan. Instead of waiting for the lockdown to end, we decided to explore, for the first time as a group, the possibilities that the new media provide to the theatre. Papalangki Theatre was already familiar with popular genres of theatre, having "theatre outside theatre" as its motto: from site-specific to open-air theatre, from puppetry to clownery, from the theatre for teenagers in public spaces (see: Angelopoulos 2017) to theatre in the

classroom, Papalangki Theatre has shown, during its ten years function, a specific interest not only in discovering and theatrically approaching under-privileged potential audiences – which either could not afford or seemed not to be interested in theatre –, but also in exploring non-theatrical spaces and their influence in each performance's dramaturgy. So, going online during the pandemic, in other words, exploring the "cyberspace" – as defined by Papagiannouli (Papagiannouli 2011: 208), "a socio-political in-between space and non-space, where the participants are present and absent at the same time in a live and mediatised experience" (see also: Papagiannouli 2016: 6) – and trying to build a new kind of dramaturgical language, seemed more than normal; we conceived it as the next step to a particular approach to theatre and performance we already had followed and the social targeting of which used to determine its structure and aesthetics.

Our digital media dramaturg proposed the performative archive's form after two months of *Zoom* rehearsals (which were being recorded) and short improvisational videos on the play's scenes and characters that the actors-narrators were shooting. The already gathered material was so vast and diverse that it became pressing to decide how to communicate it with our audience. After rejecting the option of throwing it away and creating a "live" streamed through internet performance, it was decided not only to build an *Instagram* performative archive sharing this already existing material but also to continue rehearsing and shooting new videos, which would also be integrated into the archive.

Respectively to *Instagram's* inherent function of free following and watching, the order of the videos was (considered as) not important, nor the frequency of uploads: every single spectator was free to senti-mentally construct his/her own order of the story, using our de-constructed per-formative material. Giving every single member of the audience the freedom to connect or disconnect as he/she wishes the archive's "episodes", Alfred Jarry's original play was transformed for us too into material for at-home improvisations and a script, from which we could freely move away. So, except videos based on the play's scenes (the dinner, the war, etc.), also videos presenting additional "fictitious" scenes (such as reportage from the Czar's and Bourgelas meeting), or videos where the characters explained their motives or even tried their new "royal" clothing started to appear at the archive. Presenting their personal spaces, using their households, and commenting on the characters and their everyday situation, the actors were soon transformed into narrators (or, using Brecht's terms, "demonstrators" (Brecht 2014 [1950]: 176): not of Jarry's play, but of their own effort to rehears *Ubu Roi* at home.

Since our first rehearsals, we had also realised that grotesque acting approaches, considered traditionally appropriate for a performance of *Ubu Roi* (as implied by Jarry himself (Jarry 1972 [1896])) were not "fitting" in to the new digital form we had chosen. *Instagram* (as well as other digital media) is based on the capturing of its user's every moment (Caldeira 2016: 136), giving a notional but persuasive depiction of rough "reality". So, the acting should adjust to these preconditions and become simpler; in any case, it became obvious that the actors should always speak directly to their audience, as the *Instagram* influencers do. The play's language should also adjust to these new circumstances: written more than 100 years ago, *Ubu Roi*'s original dialogues should be cut and edited. This simplification of the play's dialogues (thus, of its form) also led to the integration of another key element into our production: the use of home objects and consumables not only as props but also as personifications of the play's characters; a kind of puppet theatre available to the actors isolated in their houses.

Figure 2. **Objects as characters in *UBUmaterial***

UBUmaterial actually depicted not an *Instagram*-mediated version of Jarry's play, but mainly the attempt of our actors to perform this play at home during the pandemic using their imagination and whatever was available. This "primitivism" on the means, this denudation of performing an action from everything not important, combined with a desire for unmediated communication with the audience, was, according to our perspective, already a political statement against general quitting and frustration, in a time that all theatrical and artistic activity was necessarily paused. In this notion,

UBUmaterial could be seen as an act of resistance, creation, and intervention not only because of its building and presentation but also because it was giving the audience the chance to comment and react to its posts. Our spontaneous live shows provided the same possibilities via *Instagram*. Our first broadcast on pre-Valentine 13 February 2021, a sorrowful night due to the lockdown, allowed our friends and spectators to connect and be entertained. Another live show was cancelled, with an *Instagram* story noting: 'UBU ROI said: The online party is CANCELLED' and with a collaged image of one of the performer's face on the body of the Prime Minister of Greece, reacting to the police clashes with students in Thessaloniki. Through our *Instagram* archive, *Ubu Roi*, an already political play, which depicts the cruelty and ridiculous nature of power (see, for example, Banu 1988), became our material for political influence, intervention, and, why not, change.

Is this a (popular) theatre?

Someone could argue that *UBUmaterial* performative archive is not *stricto sensu* theatre since it lacks liveness and immediacy, which is considered constitutive even in the digital genres of theatre (see, for example, Jamieson 2008: 23, who notes that "the experience is activated and shared in real time by an audience that is present virtually and sometimes also physically"). The "liveness debate" (Bay-Cheng et al. 2015: 14) is fundamental to the discussion on the relation between media and live performance, and theory has made great efforts to address it. Hayles (Hayles 1999: 290), describing the beginning of a post-human era, concludes that the post-human perspective has altered the relation of human subjectivity to its environment (thus, our understanding of what is live or not), while Auslander, reflecting on liveness in theatre, argues that "to understand the relationship between live and mediatized forms, it is necessary to investigate that relationship as historical and contingent, not as ontologically given or technologically determined" (Auslander 1999: 51), also suggesting that "reproduction (recording) is the key-issue" (Auslander 1999: 52). Avoiding entering the theoretical conversation, we may here empirically suggest that, although in *UBUmaterial* the meeting between audience and show (actors) happened at different times, in a "cyber-time", as well as in a "cyberspace", and it was intermediated by *Instagram*, the contact was no less "real". After all, who can say that the virtual world that we got so used to is less "existent" than the everyday experience? Who could surely support that the adopted identities in digital media are less important for their creators than their physical selves (as Elwell 2014: 236 implies)? And who could be sure on the boundaries between material and digital world, and the place or the role of theatre in this

Figure 3. **Use of 'screen within a screen' in *UBUmaterial_Captain* video**

blurring division? Finally, how could we answer what is a theatre in our digital and intermediated times? When *Ubu Roi* was presented in 1896 at Théâtre de l'Œuvre for the one and only performance, it was considered a scandal, but it also marked the start of modernism in theatre. Thus, who knows what form(s) theatre will take during and after the huge *merdre* (the play begins with the French word for "shit", with an extra "r") we live in?

But there is an extra question left to be answered here: are these new forms a new kind of popular theatre? Although Theodore W. Adorno had warned us that "nothing is more damaging to theoretical knowledge of modern art than its reduction to what it has in common with older periods" (quoted by Grau 2003: 7), we cannot avoid paralleling the immense potentialities that digital technology has opened to performance practices, integrating at the same time the features of traditional popular theatre as described above: simplicity in acting and of means, a script of plot guidelines rather than a piece of literature, directed spontaneity rather than logical structure, interaction with the undefined audience, and a "space" where this audience is not only free to attend but it is also encouraged to comment and participate. Thus, we tend to agree that the answer should be "yes", or as Susan Broadhurst summarizes: "Quintessential aesthetic features of the liminal [she uses this term instead of digital to describe a performance at the edge of what is possible] appear to be hybridization, indeterminacy, a lack of 'aura' and the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and popular culture." (Broadhurst 1999: 1)

Respectively, we believe that the answer about the popularity of *UBUmaterial* performative archive should also be definitely "yes". We live in a world where cell phones and the connectivity provided by them are as important as food and water. We live through our phones, and, in a sense, we live for our phones. We reach and create a great deal of information, and we share it with the others; we have been transformed into "produsers" of a "creation of shared content [which] takes place in a networked, participatory environment which breaks down the boundaries between producers and consumers and instead enables all participants to be users as well as producers of information and knowledge – frequently in a hybrid role of *produser* where usage is necessarily also productive" (Bruns 2008: 21). Participation, responsibility, and accountability, as political democratic values, get stronger through these little screens; after all, which channel(s) of communication may today guarantee more connectivity, intermediation, and interconnection – meaning, which are more popular? Thus, is it not normal to consider the performative actions presented through these channels as popular (theatre)?

David Mayer observes that "popular, in the widest sense, is something 'of the people,' for our purposes in drama that is principally concerned with the widest reach of audience available at a given moment or place" (Mayer 1977: 263). In this sense, *Ubumaterial* performative archive on *Instagram*, as well as other digital forms of theatre and performance, may be a kind of popular theatre that we cannot yet conceive in its wholeness. But we believe that we will surely be obliged to in the future.

UBUmaterial performative archive
Directors: Tasos Angelopoulos and Yannis Didaskalou
Performers: Dimitris Kapetanios, Dimitris Lolis, Liana Taousiani
Dramaturg: Panayiota Konstantinakou
Digital Media Dramaturg: Christina Papagiannouli
Scenic and costume coordination: Matina Megla
Graphics and subtitles: Christos Tsavlidis
Original play translation: Zoe Samara
The production is funded by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sport
Find it on *Instagram*: @ubumaterial
More on Papalangki Theatre: www.papalangki.gr

Figure 4. **Mme Ubu addresses to the "polish nation"**

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