MAKE (DIS)BELIEVE: CREATIVE SPECTACULARIZATION OF THE WAR ON THEATRE STAGE IN *THE GREAT EVIL*

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Abstract. This article deals with the issue of production of belief on stage of the theatre. The research presented in the article aims to contribute to the discussion on how understanding tools and techniques of building fiction in theatre helps to deconstruct and understand mediatized images of reality. The case in point is a Lithuanian theatre production *The Great Evil* (orig. *Didis blogis*, 2015, director Árpád Schilling), which will be analyzed as an example of militarized conflict depicted as a spectacle. Analysis of the performance and of its reception using tools proposed by Erving Goffman allowed to find aesthetic means specific to the theatre that were used to present the spectacularization and artifice as weapons of modern warfare.

1. Introduction

The focus of this article is the production of belief. The "make-believe" is the key faculty of theatre. Since its beginnings in Ancient Greece, Western theatre has explored and perfected ways of creating a convincing illusion of reality on stage to alter the spectator's mind. It was Aristotle (2013), who in 335 BC defined the effect of catharsis in the audience. Catharsis, let us remind ourselves, is a change in the spectator's mind achieved by convincing combination of theatrical means such as a plot, characters, thought (idea), language, spectacle, and music. Hence, already at its beginnings theatre was associated with persuasion, influence, and changing minds.

Historiography has well documented the growing power of theatre to impress and to persuade. In the late 19th century, theatrics reached the peak of verisimilitude of performance. So-called naturalist theatre offered its audiences strikingly realistic auditory, visual, and even olfactory experiences. The "make-believe" grew so powerful that it provoked a counter reaction. As far as the aesthetics were concerned, the movement of symbolism and its subsequent incarnations of anti-realist theatre rejected all the references to the reality on stage altogether. In terms of ideological implications, the "make-believe" was identified as potentially manipulative and indoctrinating. Emblematic case of deconstruction of the realist theatre is the theory and practice of German political theatre maker Bertolt Brecht. By the mid-20th century Brecht (1957) developed an original theory for theatre practice which in

contrast to the convention of the Western theatre was refuting the effect of "make-believe", and famously insisted, that the theatre has expose itself to promote critical thinking and resilience to manipulation in the audience. In the Brechtian theatre the spectator who believes had to be transformed into one, who questions and understands. The research presented in the article aims to contribute to the discussion on how understanding tools and techniques of building belief in theatre helps to deconstruct (mediatized) images of reality.

2. Problem statement

An elaborate apparatus of script, space, decor, costumes, make-up, and directed action was perfected throughout the history of theatre. During the 20th century, however, another application of theatrical means of "make-believe" was found. With the advance of broadcasting technology theatrical staging and presenting of news events on screen first, film, then television, computer, and portable devices gradually become omnipresent. One can point to numerous examples of weaponized staged events that use theatrical apparatus to create an illusion of a certain version of reality. The war in Ukraine is an acute point in this case. In the Russian propaganda, the war in Ukraine does not take place. The Russian storyline insists on the "special military operation" intended to denazify Ukraine (Patrona, 2023, p. 260). Among the numerous propaganda themes related to the war, the recurring theme of staging attacks and massacres is prominent. The theme of staging is designed to relativize the actions of the Russian military in Ukraine and to deflect responsibility from Russia for the massacres committed by the Russian armed forces (Drugă, 2022, p. 90).

    The hypothesis behind the research is that by showcasing its artificiality the theatre production can communicate the reality as constructed and staged. Thus, theatre by encouraging disbelief can promote critical thinking and a production can become an important asset in information warfare. The research presents the case, a Lithuanian theatre production *The Great Evil*, which will be analyzed as an example of militarized conflict depicted as a spectacle.

3. Literature review

Theatricalization of the war has a longstanding tradition. During the 20th century, theatricalization became increasingly mediatized, which produced a curious effect. It was Jean Baudrillard, who observing the media coverage of the first Gulf War pointed to the question of what is being observed. In his collection of three essays *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Baudrillard (1995) has not questioned the factuality of the war but tried to interpret the effect of its imagery as presented or, indeed, staged in the media. In the second essay, he claims that the Gulf War is above all a media event, a simulacrum of the war, a virtual event, which serves a variety of political and ideological purposes on both fighting sides. Faithful to his idea of simulacra, Baudrillard points to the fact that in the case of war, just like in so many other cases media consumers do not have direct access to the material. Instead, they are provided with selected (and let us add – directed) imagery. All this careful staging contaminates real events with a "structural unreality" of their portrayal, which results in a cleavage between the "real" and "imaginary" events, which renders them speculative and prone to manipulation.

In contrast to the first Gulf War, theatricalization and mediatization of the contemporary war take place on both the mainstream stage and on the "off" stage so to speak. In case of the war in Ukraine alongside official, government-controlled campaigns, the homemade projects are being broadcast and thus decentralize and diversify the presentation of the events. *TikTok*, a platform for video creation and sharing, became one of the richer stages for theatricalized images from Ukraine. The research carried out by the *British Broadcasting Company* identified three popular genres: fake live streams, fake video games, and repurposed old videos or images (Sardarizadeh, 2022). The examples point to various and different theatrical techniques, which as their main objective have the effect of "make-believe". Can the "real" theatre do something about the appropriation of its means and ends?

Clare Finburgh offers an answer in her book dedicated to the spectacularization of the war in theatre of the United Kingdom. The scholar argues that theatre is better equipped than any other medium to create possibilities for more informed, reasoned engagement with the hegemony of meaning making. It is so because theatre can overtly expose fabrication and foster a spectator capable of distinguishing between different orders of deception (Finburgh, 2017, p. 8).

Consequently, Finburgh (2017, p. 266) raises the question: "If spectacles are effects of power, designed to win wars, win elections and win customers, then how can these spectacles be better understood, so that we can better understand how they seek to work on us and others around us?". The scholar points to the situation where increased usage of *mise-en-scène*, choreography, set design, rhetoric, and spectacle in media for presentation of war and for management of its perception creates a specific challenge for the theatre makers (Finburgh, 2017, p. 3). If theatrical apparatus has thus become an essential weapon in modern warfare how the theatre makers can communicate a pacifist message in their productions. The scholar notes a variety of strategies invented across the globe. For example, "Crime and Punishment" by Ravenhill (2007) relates a highly mediatized stage-managed real-life episode when in 2003 crowds of Iraqis were herded into the Baghdad, Iraq, square where a statue of Saddam Hussein was being pulled down. Another example of "unconcealment" is Hayley Squires' (2012) *Vera Vera Vera*. The play focuses on the funeral of Bobby, a British serviceman, killed in Iraq. The family learns that the funeral might be broadcasted and goes to great lengths to transform his life and death into a public spectacle (the television cameras never arrive). Finally, Finburgh points to a third example: *Grounded* by American playwright Brant (2017), which takes on the spectacularization of combat itself. The play stages a female fighter pilot who is "grounded" from operations in the Middle East when she becomes pregnant, and downgraded to the role of drone operator, and illustrates how the spectacles depicted by digitized screen warfare will never fully conceal the destruction wrought by armies (Finburgh, 2017, pp. 8–9). According to the scholar, all these examples comment on the weaponization of spectacle in war using theme, discussion, and dialogue, there are, however, a number of theatrical pieces that sought to expose spectacularization by the aesthetic or formal means that are unique to theatre. The idea of challenging the weaponization of theatrical apparatus by exposing it within the production is essential for the research presented here. Similarly, to this research Finburgh (2017, p. 5) is concerned with the ability of theatre to expose the constructedness of all discourses, whether artistic, or in politics and the media. This research differs by putting a stronger emphasis on production and questioning of belief.

4. Theoretical framework

The production of belief is a key concern of Goffman's (1956, p. 10) theoretical thought outlined in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In the book, the scholar proposed a dramaturgical approach for studying how people use theatrical apparatus, tools, and techniques for persuasion in everyday interactions through carefully managed social performances.

The theory of dramaturgical analysis developed by Goffman inspired countless scholars and was applied in numerous ways. One can observe that the title "Beyond Goffman: Some Notes on Life and Theatre as Art" (Mangham, 1996) is prominent among academic publications. Hence, currently, the tools of dramaturgical analysis are employed for varied research, topics of which are far beyond the ones Goffman has originally worked with. Such research includes analysis of people and social groups, events, and organizations, ranging from the impression management performed by vloggers (Krisnawati, 2020), to the dramaturgical features of sports coaching (Hall et al., 2024), and dramaturgy of socio-political change (Yuana et al., 2020).

Admittedly, the tools of dramaturgical analysis were not intended to analyze aesthetic objects such as a theatre production. Yet Goffman himself saw a little difference between the real and the artistic performance and

> "explicitly draws the analogy between normal interactions experienced by subjects and events that happen on the stage; he speaks of perspectives of theatrical representation, of principles of a dramatic type; "the common social relationship is itself organized like a staged scene, with an exchange of theatrically exaggerated actions, counteractions and exiting 'lines'" (Wolf, 1979, pp. 88–89).

The theories of performance studies, especially those dealing with the issues of theatricality, were built on Goffmanian articulation of the presentation techniques (Fischer-Lichte, 1995). This was because theatrical performance in comparison to others forms of artistic communication (literature, painting, music, for example) is closer to the interactions of daily life (de Marinis, 2004, p. 238). In de Marini's opinion, Goffman's "dramatic metaphor" proves to be extremely valuable to scholars interested in the type of macro-interaction that constitutes theatrical communication:

> "Goffman does not simply tell us that daily life also involves lies, fiction, pretense, *mise-en-scène*, or that representation is not confined to the realm of fiction but constitutes an important, essential devise in our daily life. He also informs us, above all, that truth and lies, honesty and fiction, pretense and real acts, communication and seduction, and display and concealment constitute the basic materials that theatrical interactions are made of, just like everyday life. If life is also theater (or, more precisely, if it can be read and analyzed through a theatrical metaphor), then theater itself *also* involves *real* life, actions, transformations, and behavior" (de Marinis, 2004, p. 239).

In this research, tools of dramaturgical analysis will be employed by performing an analysis of a theatre production, and the Goffmanian theory will be tested against the actual staging. In comparison to standard methods of performance analysis, Goffmanian concepts provide an advantage of seeing the production as a performative construct intended to

"make-believe" and persuade. Moreover, the idea of continuous interrelation between the fictive and the real embedded into the dramaturgical analysis readily allows to see a theatrical production as socially active event.

Similar investigations were conducted before. For instance, research by Mangham seems very relevant. It compares a scene from a performance of *Waiting for Godot* (premiered in 1953) (by Beckett's (1982) play *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*, originally published in 1953) and an incident from a team development meeting for a group of senior managers. The scholar focuses on the nature of the experiences of the respective audiences and emphasizes the notion of art as an "unconcealment" (Mangham, 1996). Hence, the techniques of theatrical apparatus such as script, space, decor, and directed action on the stage of the theatre create a powerful effect of unmasking. The theatre thus can be regarded as a tool for fostering critical thinking and resilience toward staged realities.

Elements of theatrical apparatus, tools, and techniques are the backbone of Goffmanian dramaturgical analysis. The key elements to be considered by performing the analysis of (social) performance are:

- Part: Goffman discriminates between two extremes – the "sincere" and the "cynical" playing. Playing of the first type occurs when the performer is "fully taken in by his act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality he stages is the real reality". Playing of the second type occurs when "the individual has no belief in his act" (Goffman, 1956, p. 10);
- Front: Goffman (1956, pp. 13–15) understands the "front" as "setting" (furniture, decor, physical layout, and other background items) and "personal front" (insignia of office or rank, clothing, sex, age, and racial characteristics, size and looks, posture, speech patterns, facial expressions, bodily gestures);
- Dramatic realization: these are the efforts to make invisible "costs" of one's work visible. In other words, dramatic realization concerns developing the "part" of a professional (a surgeon, a violinist, a nurse, *etc.*);
- Maintenance of excessive control or, in other words, coherence of the act: Goffman observes that every act is susceptible to miscommunication, even as small details might compromise the trustworthiness of the play. Hence, performers commonly attempt to ensure that as many as possible of the minor events in the performance, will occur in such a way as to convey either no impression or an impression that is compatible and consistent with the overall definition of the situation that is being fostered (Goffman, 1956, p. 33);
- Misrepresentation is another notable instance of the interweaving of staging and reality: in social performance misrepresentation occurs when the performer is able and motivated to misrepresent the facts (Goffman, 1956, pp. 37–38). It is important to note that Goffman (1956, p. 38) appreciates the audiences' skepticism: "it is natural for us to feel that the impression the performer seeks to give may be true or false, genuine or spurious, valid or 'phony'";
- Teams: the last concept that seems to be relevant to the analysis of theatre production is defined by Goffman (1956, p. 48) as "a set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine". It is important to note the choice of words: the scholar calls this teamwork "a type of collusion or 'understanding'" (Goffman, 1956, p. 48).

To sum up, in comparison to standard theories of performance research the Goffmanian theory is considerably critical. From the outset, it invites "suspending the belief" for the unveiling of hidden motives and mechanisms of the play. Moreover, the Goffmanian approach allows us to see aesthetic and empiric realities as inseparably linked and have a mutual influence. Hence, his theory permits us to look for theatrical techniques intended to convince the audiences in and outside the theatre.

5. Methodology

The case in point of this research is a production created at the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre (LNDT) in 2015. The play *The Great Evil* was written by Lithuanian playwright Marius Ivaškevičius (2014), and it was directed by Hungarian director Árpád Schilling. The cast was created out of Lithuanian, Russian, and Ukrainian actors. The play and production create a complex and multilayered piece about the "premonition of war". The production provoked controversial reactions: critical reception was mixed, yet the production proved to be popular among the audiences. There were two motives for revisiting *The Great Evil* in this research. First, the aesthetic features of the Ivaškevičius play and Schilling's production. *The Great Evil* addresses the issue of mimesis, mimetic art, and its relation to reality. As Andrius Jevsejevas (2015–2016) noted, the production does not portray the war, it rather encourages its audience to reflect what the war (known from distant mediatized images) could be. The second motive is the relevance of the play. Its "premonition of war" proved to be at least partially acuate despite being written before full scale Russian invasion to Ukraine and its theatricalization begun.

In the following pages, the results of the analysis of the production will be presented. The production was attended and observed by me once in 2016. Recordings, photographs, and the script (courtesy of the LNDT) were used as additional material. The following analysis of the performance is based on Patrice Pavis' concept of the "performance text", which views the performance as a layered, multidimensional text composed of verbal, non-verbal, spatial, and visual elements that convey meaning in unique ways. According to Pavis (1988), each component of the performance – gesture, movement, spatial arrangement, lighting, and audience engagement – functions as part of a "text" that can be read and interpreted. This theoretical lens allows to explore how meaning is dynamically constructed between performers and audience.

In order to enrich the research with an observer's perspective, autoethnography will play a central role in the methodology. As the researcher is also involved in the communication process of the performance, I will document my subjective experiences, reflections and evolving interpretations, creating a layered analysis. This autoethnographic approach will allow me to engage with key elements of the Goffmanian dramaturgical analysis and reveal their semiotic rendering in the performance text. My reflections will reveal how the theoretical concepts developed by Goffman manifest themselves in practice and influence the production of belief.

In terms of data collection, the main source was real-time observation of the performance. Videos and photos will act as a reminder. The observational data will capture verbal and non-verbal signs, which will be systematically organized using predefined categories based on Goffmanian theory.

By integrating the theory of dramaturgical analysis with autoethnographic insight, this research will create a multi-layered analysis of meaning-making in performance. This approach will allow an exploration of how performance elements contribute to the complex construction of belief. As the main method is autoethnography, the research relies heavily on the subjective experiences and interpretations of the researcher. To mitigate this the research will be enriched by a qualitative content analysis of publications related to *The Great Evil*. The corpus of publications will include reviews and comments that were published after the premiere. The pre-premiere publications, such as promotional material, will not be analyzed. The content analysis will be performed using a coding framework based on Goffman's categories. Reviews will be selected based on relevance to the production, ensuring a focused analysis. Coding will be conducted manually, applying Goffman's framework to identify recurring themes of spectacularization, theatricalization, and relativization on performative, visual, and experiential levels. The analysis follows a thematic exploration approach, uncovering patterns in how critics construct meaning and interpret the production.

6. Findings

6.1. Production

- Front: in the first scene, the audience is presented with a view of a realistically looking wooden cabin and family having dinner and conversing casually in Russian. In contrast to the conventional realistic theatre, the cabin is presented as if placed on an empty stage. Hence, the audience can see the architecture of the stage and the theatre. Such a visual solution breaks the coherence and veristimility of the front and makes it look like an artifice;
- Dramatic realization: during the first scene all of a sudden, the airplane seat drops from above breaking the roof of the house. The body of a dead woman is still in the seat. Imagery is a clear pointer to the *Malaysian Airlines* Flight 17 tragedy in 17 July, 2014. The family screams in panic. Two men in nondescript grey appear almost instantly and start giving orders. They force the family to leave, and when left alone begin creating the footage. The dramatic action emphasizes staging techniques: "Where do I stand? Next to her? What do I do?", asks one. "Enter from there, slowly, faster, hands, move your hands, ok, we are on", exclaims another. Again, contrary to the usual efforts to conceal the "backstage" of the staged events in this production the dramatic realization is exposed.

It is further exposed in the third episode. The episode begins by setting a scene for a vigil in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Actors bring candles, tulips, and a podium with microphones, a screen with cheerful faces is lowered from above, and emotional music is switched on. After the stage is set the representative of government gives her speech, followed by the first and second Dutch women. The scene ends abruptly after the second Dutch woman starts openly blaming the president of Russia for the *Malaysian Airlines* Flight 17 tragedy. The officials silence the woman for that.

The fourth and fifth episodes are further elaboration on themes of xenophobia, violence, and mediatization. In the fourth episode, the already familiar characters in gray are presented as "Neos" in reference to neo-Nazism. They wait for daughter (a Russian speaking character) to appear and attack her violently. The action presumably still takes place in the Netherlands

as the "Neos" make daughter swallow tulips. The slogan *Fuck Tupin* is spray painted of daughters breast. The perpetrators explicitly record their violent act for a future broadcast. The theme of violence in virtual reality will be further explored in later episodes;

- Part and misrepresentation: the sixth episode is particularly interesting in terms of further deconstruction of theatrical "make-believe". Suddenly an audience member speaks up loudly and starts commenting on the stage action. The audience soon realizes that it is the actor Valentinas Masalskis. Moreover, the actor speaks in the first person: uses the actual names of the cast and mentions details of their private lives. The initial surprise of an actor planted as an audience member points to the complexities of misrepresentation as at first the audience is prompted to believe in the disruptive behavior of one of its members who turns out to be an actor. The confusion deepens as Masalskis articulates radical and offensive statements that start to seem overacted and not consistent with his genuine ideas;

- Teams: after Masalskis' initial outburst, the rest of the cast seems to have stopped acting and stepped out of their characters. In terms of dramaturgical analysis, the episode reveals the playing as such: every person on stage has double if not multiple personas and respective motivations at the same time. An opposite maneuver is created next, in the seventh episode. Another member of the audience rises and asks for a voice. She says she is Ukrainian and has something to add to Masalskis' Europhobic statements. This time the audience does not learn whether the woman was an actor. This leads to a belief that there exists a sort of collusion among the actors behind the scenes as the audience is exposed to the acting and the non-acting, and left wondering about the motives behind it. Such effect is maintained in several further episodes;

- Maintenance of excessive control: from what has been said it becomes evident that the coherence of the act in the production is constantly disrupted. The audience is made to experience the doubt about the authenticity of people and objects, texts, and events presented on stage and in the auditorium. Hence, in contrast to the "normal" routine in the Goffmanian sense, the production employed all the details to question the trustworthiness of the play. Subsequent episodes are a case in point.

The audience is gradually made aware that the action on stage takes place in a nondescript war camp. The dialogue suggests that the location is somewhere in the Black Sea region. Masalskis and Evgenya Gladiy (a Ukrainian female actor) speak Russian and act as guards of the war captives – two Lithuanian and one Russian actor, who still speaks in the first person. Brutal questioning, however, is presented as if being filmed for an Internet broadcast. Masalskis and Gladiy constantly exchange technical details on editing, subtitling, framing, *etc.*, while trying to create perfect footage and generate as many previews as possible. Hence, the war is played for the camera and the social media. Warfare in the virtual world is further emphasized in episode eleven as the next captive played by famous female actor and media personality Beata Tiškevič is brought in. The dialogue with Gladiy gradually makes the audience aware that the latter feels vengeful for the posts created by the former: Tiškevič publicly shamed Gladiy and attracted a considerable following. The episode provides an insight into the intricacies and interviewing of virtual and physical violence pointing to the essential lack of difference in the effect. Violence on the battlefield causes harm as well as performed on social networks.

The final episodes of the production are interesting as well as complicated instances of disrupted coherence of the act. The production gradually turns phantasmagoric, highly theatrical and incredible. As series of scenes depicting death and murder break the verisimilitude of the act, new symbolic characters are introduced. Three mothers (in Russian called Sladkaya (the sweet one), Bednaya (the poor one), Nezhnaya (the gentle one)) reappear on stage with the treats for a feast. The feasting is to celebrate a record increase of price for a war captive. The feast however turns into the improvised peace talks as a new character – Savičenko (the female actor's Nelė Savičenko's real name) is brought in. Savičenko is presumably a high-ranking war captive, authorized to discuss the peace treaty. When she falls asleep Masara and the mothers start to divide the territories on the world map, later on a watermelon, which is used in lieu of a globe. In a final *coup de théâtre* Gladiy returns, opens her backpack and spills out the eyeballs ripped out of the rest of (unseen) prisoners backstage. The episode and the main action of the play end with the guards disappearing under the stage, leaving one prisoner with freshly ripped out eyes on stage together with the mothers, who declare him still useful and worthy of care despite being an enemy. In contrast with the quasi-realistic beginning the production ends in a very different style. The explicit theatricality of the latter part of the production presents the audience with the full arsenal of modes and means of theatricalization. Thus, the audience travels all the way from encouragement to discouragement of belief in what is presented on stage.

6.2. Reception

For the following analysis nine publications were selected. All were published after the premiere of *The Great Evil* took place. The earliest publication was published in 2015, the latest in 2016. Majority of the publications are reviews, published in cultural journals and magazines. To enrich the material an academic article as well as published transcription of academic debate of theatre scholars on the subject matter were included. To introduce diversified perspectives two comments by a philosopher and a journalist were included as well. All publications were in Lithuanian, the translation into English were made by me.

The coding of the material was based on similar categories as the performance analysis presented above. Reoccurring patterns related to spectacularization, theatricalization, and relativization were identified in critical comments on the front, dramatic realization, misrepresentation, teams, and maintenance of excessive control:

- Front: most of the reviewers and commentators point to the lack of stylistic coherence of the production and its eclectic aesthetics. "Epic, Brechtian, social, documentary, media, theatre of cruelty, intermedia, theatre within theatre, standup, the transformation of representational theatre into performative theatre – all of these genres and forms of theatre, alive in different historical periods, are interwoven in the fabric of the production" (Pukelytė, 2016, p. 23). For one critic the stage set seamed "uncomfortable" in conventional sense: the director and the set designer refused to use a large-scale plan and seemed to be concerned with exposing the actual architecture of the stage. The doors, the pipes, the railing of the second floor, *etc.*, are illuminated and made visible as if stating, "This is theatre; when the reality of the space is covered, fiction appears" (Meilutytė, 2015, p. 44). Ambiguous playing with the verisimilitude was also noted: the artists "seem to create an illusion, flirting even with some of the clichés of naturalistic

theatre, suggesting that something unspeakably cruel and bloodthirsty is happening on stage" (Jevsejevas, 2015–2016). However, the horror lessens when an exaggerated, highly theatrical scream is heard or "an obviously fake hand is thrown down onto the stage, lit by a single spotlight, or rivers of artificial blood pour out" (Jevsejevas, 2015–2016);

- Dramatic realization: the reviewers register overexposed staging techniques that help to complicate the message and relativize the content of the production. One of the commentators found "this relativization of evil and the realization that there is nothing innocent in our times" interesting and important (Donskis, 2015). The inclusion of imagery and logic of the mediated culture achieves such an effect. The scenes of filming and creating a propagandistic narrative, "live" broadcasts of tortures via smartphones on social networks, in one of the reviewer's opinion, allow pointing to the illusionary of the existence of society in the context of meta-reality "where telecom operators [are able] to manipulate public opinion and influence it in their favor" (Pukelytė, 2016, p. 21). The inclusion of scenes, which are "using telecommunication tools as props", permits the artists to avoid any side-taking and to articulate an ambivalent message to the audience (Pukelytė, 2016, p. 21);

- Misrepresentation: the overtly theatrical and confusing acting for reviewers is another instrument to relativize and create a spectacle. The misrepresentation effect achieved by the overlap of acting and non-acting allows the blurring of the line between the theatre and the real. For one of the commentators, it is "the most striking leitmotif of the play and the performance, which is dotted but clearly articulated as the action of the play develops" (Pukelytė, 2016, p. 22). Another reviewer finds a curious overlap of real and fictional in the scene where "Masalskis and Gladiy (a Ukrainian and daughter of the famous actor Gennadiy Gladiy) rise from the audience. The actors who have risen speak with powerful texts, which are dramatically unpolished, very ear-piercing, sounding very harshly dissonant" (Donskis, 2015). Actors coming out of their characters in front of the audience in this episode turns the drama "into a theatrical interlude, where the audience can enjoy the unfolding of the theatrical kitchen and the actors relationships" (Pukelytė, 2016, p. 22);

- Teams and collusion of multiple personas and motivation: in reviewers' opinion, acting in the Brechtian style, where the oscillation between the actor's real and fictional character is made visible, functions as one of the most powerful ways to point to the ambiguity of evil in the contemporary world. Everyone and everything now appears to have a hidden agenda and a driving motive. The complicated stage presence of Masalskis is a perfect example: "One would like to think that [...] [his aggression] have been extracted from the dark recesses of the person, the actor V. Masalskis' darkest consciousness, and have been used for the creation of the character Masara, the person, the actor V. Masalskis, retreats, and the person, the actor V. Masalskis, who continues to speak and to act in the performance is no longer the aforementioned person, the actor V. M., but the character Masara, who is transforming into an evil demon with increasing speed" (Balevičiūtė, 2015). Such layered stage presence altogether grounds the abandonment of excessive control over the message the production creates;

- Maintenance of excessive control: the eclectic aesthetics of the play and production disrupts the coherence, a key element of the convincing message and effective persuasion. For some of the commentators, this is a shortcoming: the question *What would you do if war broke out tomorrow?* is articulated as if "between the lines" (Balevičiūtė, 2015), "it seems that the creators of the performance, who were looking at the evil

in human nature, were drawn into a kind of black hole of mythical thinking [...] and tempted to try to convince the audience that everything is relative [...]. Whom is the play advocating?" (Braškytė, 2015). Absurd imagery on stage might "mock the ingenuity of Russian propaganda. Or is this a criticism of American autocracy? Alternatively, are they simply demonstrating a manipulative propaganda technique?" (Meilutytė, 2015, p. 42). No answers are given. The spectacular scenes of the interplay between the real, the fictional, and the mediated for some looked superficial: "For me, the whole production is similarly virtual – that is to say, fake: virtual lives, virtual violence, virtual actualities, spoken with virtual bravery and fervor. [...] It is difficult to see a clear standpoint in the play itself" (Oginskaitė, 2015).

For other commentators, however, ambivalence was a key to understanding the intentions of the artists who refuse to be convincing. The production avoids instructing the audience by painstakingly maintaining the viewers in-between reality and fiction (Gritėnas, 2015) and consciously upkeeping the Brechtian alienation effect (Pukelytė, 2016). One of the commentators notes that the audience is constantly encouraged to rethink its relationship to what is being represented throughout the performance. In the reviewer's opinion, such an effect is intentional and calculated. It does disturb the audience and thus prevents them from watching the performance "safely" (Dementavičiūtė-Stankuvienė, 2015). Another commentator associated the aesthetical solutions of the production with modern warfare: interplay between reality and fiction is very relevant in the context of hybrid war-making "where the main weapon is the sense of uncertainty, the ability to distinguish fact from fiction, reality from imagination when one is no longer sure whether what one is seeing is happening, or whether it is just another propagandist 'performance'" (Dementavičiūtė-Stankuvienė, 2015).

7. Discussion

In response to the initial hypothesis of the research, the findings indicate that by showcasing its artificiality the theatre production can communicate the reality as constructed and staged. In the case of *The Great Evil* theatre indeed exposed itself on many different levels. Contrary to the realist convention the production systematically broke coherence of the single style of staging thus refuting the effect of "make-believe". The audience was constantly reminded that it attends a production and could not be absorbed by it in the traditional sense. *The Great Evil* invited to wonder, to doubt and to reflect about the authenticity of the play, especially in those moments when the actors acted in the first person and used their real names and publicly known personal details. Moreover, the poetics of production facilitated awareness of presence of the ones who write the script, create the décor, direct the action, and evidently have the ideological agenda.

Instruments adapted from Goffmanian theory of dramaturgical analysis for analysis of an actual production helped to understand how the message was articulated by textual and theatrical communication. The notions of front, dramatic realization, part and misrepresentation, teams, and maintenance of excessive control allowed for methodologically grounded and critically engaged content analysis of the production. The Goffmanian terminology provided the possibility to grasp the immediate connection between the theatrical and empirical

realities. Arguably, such an approach has the greater advantage of critical engagement with the analyzed material in comparison to standard tools of performance analysis.

In the case of *The Great Evil* the instruments of dramaturgical analysis allowed to find aesthetic means specific to the theatre (*i.e.* the constant disruption of mechanisms of theatrical "make-believe") that were used to present the spectacularization and artifice as weapons of modern warfare. It is worth giving an emphasis to the finding that the pacifist message in the production was articulated not only by its theme and script, but by the aesthetic or formal means that are unique to theatre. In analyzing the reception of *The Great Evil*, the application of concepts of dramaturgical analysis proved to be instrumental in structuring coding categories. By examining comments on the front, dramatic realization, misrepresentation, teams, and maintenance of excessive control, dramaturgical analysis provided a framework for systematically interpreting how the production was perceived. These coding categories facilitated a nuanced understanding of the reviewer's responses, capturing key themes such as ambivalence, theatricalization, spectacularity, and unbelievability of performative techniques. Ultimately, this approach enabled a comprehensive evaluation of the production's reception, highlighting the interplay between creative choices and audience interpretation.

8. Conclusions

Over the last hundred years, the weaponization of art has developed at an unprecedented speed. The arts, including the stage arts, were and are used and abused in ideological warfare alongside other means and channels of communication. Used for propaganda and fake news screens and stages have become yet another battlefield. The hypothesis behind the research presented in this article is that by showcasing its artificiality the theatre production can communicate the reality as constructed and staged. Theatre production in its turn can become an important asset in attempts to promote critical thinking in the audience facing information warfare. In response to the initial hypothesis the findings of the analysis of the *The Great Evil* indicate that by making its artificial aspects evident, the theatrical performance can demonstrate that reality is a construct, carefully shaped and presented.

The findings are in accord with Finburgh's idea of advantage of theatre to any other medium in creating possibilities for more informed, reasoned engagement with the hegemony of meaning making. In the context of this research, such an advantage is a production and questioning of belief conspicuously showcased in *The Great Evil*. In other words, the techniques of theatrical apparatus such as script, space, decor, and directed action on the stage of the theatre create a powerful effect of unmasking.

Although the Goffmanian notions of front, dramatic realization, part and misrepresentation, teams, maintenance (or, in this case, an abandonment) of excessive control were not intended to analyze a theatre production, they nevertheless allowed to grasp the aesthetic mechanism of powerful effect of unmasking. Hence, the ideas developed by Goffman can travel to theatre studies and prove to be valuable to scholars interested in the theatrical communication and interaction between the stage and the audience.

The research presented in the preceding pages focused on the creation of (dis)belief. The analysis of reception of *The Great Evil* confirmed effectiveness of the production in conveying

a revelatory message on complicated ways the meaning is created. While it remains debatable how effective is the theatre in countering the information warfare in comparison to other means of mass communication, the reception analysis indicates the potential of *The Great Evil* to foster critical thinking and resilience to indoctrination.

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