

Contemporary Latvian Theatre



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A Decade Bookazine

Edited by LAUMA MELLĒNA-BARTKEVIČA

Contemporary Latvian Theatre

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Preface

I am truly happy and proud to present the first Latvian theatre decade bookazine in English, which aims to show different facets of theatre processes in Latvia between 2010 and 2020. The idea of the project was born in spring 2019, when our Lithuanian colleagues presented us with the book *Contemporary Lithuanian Theatre*. I believe this publication represents the most important trends, changes and issues in today's performing arts in Latvia. Besides, it serves as an exhaustive source of information about the past decade in Latvian theatre, which brought into the spotlight many new names, new forms of theatre and, last but not least, new challenges for audiences due to strong social and political contexts reflected on stage.

The centenary of the Latvian state (2018) and, subsequently, the centenaries of the country's main theatres mark a new century also in the history of the performing arts, and this is therefore the right moment to review the past and look towards the future. Although the unexpected standby

mode caused by the Covid-19 virus proved that humankind has to be ready to adapt to any circumstances and improvise in order to survive, especially in the field of culture, it is worth taking advantage of this intermission in order to share with our colleagues, neighbours, guests and potential cooperation partners this compilation of articles by a group of great theatre experts – critics, educators and theatre-makers who have been actively researching, teaching and creating theatre as an ongoing process.

This bookazine offers diverse perspectives on the theatre process in Latvia between 2010 and 2020, highlighting the interaction between theatre and society, including challenges of the digital age, new spaces and production methods, and collective creation as well as touching upon theatre education, newcomers in the field and very personal experiences and observations by theatre-makers. The first and the largest chapter consists of articles on THEATRE PROCESS. In her article "Theatre and society:

sociopolitical processes and their reflections in 21st-century Latvian theatre”, Zane Radzobe analyses theatre as an art form and medium related to presentness in terms of the documentary approach, social responsibility, and the marginalisation and inclusion of such issues as national identity, politics and history. Valda Čakare deals with the transformation of space and interaction in contemporary theatre in her article “New performance spaces and redefinition of the relationship between performers and audience members in 21st-century Latvian theatre: 2010–2020” co-written with Ieva Rodiņa, who also explores the change of generations and presents a list of new names on and behind the stage in “Newcomers in Latvian theatre directing: the new generation and forms of theatre-making”. Līga Ulberte writes about recent achievements in Latvian original drama and points out the twists and turns around the notion of text in contemporary theatre in her essay “Text production methods in contemporary Latvian theatre”. Zane Kreicberga opens a new page in the written history of theatre education in Latvia after the restoration of independence in 1991, discussing the problematics of higher education in the performing arts in the article “Theatre education in Latvia: traditions and challenges”. Laine Kristberga tells a short story of liminality in the performance genre at the end of the second decade of the 21st century based on her freshly defended PhD research. Inta Balode in CASE STUDY chapter examines the complexity of dialogue between contemporary choreogra-

phy and dance and theatre in Latvia, unveiling the issues of invisibility and underestimation of movement in her article “Towards invisible choreography”, and theatre- and filmmaker Krista Burāne shares her artistic development experience within the framework of the acknowledged Homo Novus contemporary theatre festival in the chapter INSIDE OUT.

I believe in the necessity of strengthening the exchange of information and opinion with our closest neighbours in the Baltic region, and therefore I appreciate the contributions in the NEIGHBOURS’ PERSPECTIVE chapter offered by Edgaras Klivis from Lithuania and Meelis Oidsalu from Estonia. In the chapter, CREATIVE LAB, Jānis Balodis’ self-reflective artistic essay takes the reader into the workshop of today’s playwright and his artistic efforts. The last chapter, DIRECTORS’ VOICES, gives the floor to a selection of stage directors representing different generations and contributing to the development of contemporary Latvian theatre to answer a few questions about theatre in the age of changing rules. The last pages offer a detailed overview of artistic profiles and basic information about theatres and theatre festivals in Latvia, encouraging producers from other countries to initiate new and creative partnerships. The bookazine also contains selected photographs of the productions mentioned in the articles to indulge the visual perception and familiarise readers with the wide range of styles and aesthetics applied in contemporary Latvian theatre.

Explore, discover and enjoy!

ZANE RADZOBĒ

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Theatre and Society: Socio-Political Processes and their Portrayal in Latvian Theatre of the 21st Century

Latvia does not have a strong tradition of political theatre. Individual attempts to interpret the principles of epic theatre or, more recently, to refer to the topicalities of contemporary German political theatre should be viewed in the context of the dominant tradition of psychological realism and appear to be aesthetic rather than socio-political in nature. Two functions of theatre remain dominant in Latvia: theatre as entertainment and theatre as an elitist form of art (*l'art pour l'art*). Theatre as a political or civic tool has previously been discussed almost exclusively in the context of major socio-political shifts in Latvian political history, especially the First and the Third National Awakenings. During the First National Awakening in the second half of the 19th century, theatre, being one of the few public spaces tolerating relative civic liberties for ethnic Latvians in the Russian Empire (a comparatively

unrestricted right to assemble, more relaxed rules of censorship, etc.), served a didactic function and contributed to the formation of national identity and civic values in Latvian society. In the 1980s, the Third National Awakening movement worked toward regaining national independence from the Soviet Union, and theatre was actively involved with the subject of national identity. Latvian theatre of the first decades of the 21st century must be examined while taking into account these historical perspectives as a backdrop of a traditional way of thinking about theatre in Latvia. The performances mentioned later in this article have reformed the dominant aesthetics and theatre techniques in Latvian theatre, yet a strong emphasis on identity as the core subject matter remains.

The claim that theatre is a form of art that exists solely in its own time



“Considering the socio-political context of the day, even seemingly unrelated performances become part of broader cultural and social discussions.”

Legionnaires (Leģionāri)
Gertrude Street Theatre

Photo: Ģirts Raģelis

is commonly used, and it has both psychological and technical aspects. The art of theatre is often defined as a process that requires two elements: a performer and somebody who watches. This model can, of course, be elaborated to include other elements, however, even this minimalistic definition includes a third element that, although silent, has a significant impact on the experience of theatre. It is context.

Most of the works examined in this article stand out either as novel aesthetic pursuits or as practices of commercial theatre. Some are artistic highlights of Latvian theatre; others have attracted no significant interest from critics and researchers. However, when considering the socio-political context of the day, even seemingly unrelated performances become part of broader cultural and social discussions. At least three contexts must be taken into account here: the need to construct and reassess social models and identities in a new democracy; general disappointment in the political process; the literacy (or lack of it) of audiences regarding performative elements. In the context of the performative and political merging, Janelle Reinelt and Shirin M. Rai also characterise four traditional categories of political struggle: interests, representation, identity and redistribution.¹ The researchers conclude that, in a world disillusioned by political processes and democratic institutions, these forms of struggle

tend to disappear. To a large extent, Latvian society of the early 21st century can also be characterised by this description. Latvian theatre, however, has seen a steady increase in performances dealing with representation, identity and redistribution (especially inclusion and marginalisation of ethnic, cultural and gender groups), so much so that it exhibits a strong claim to become a medium for socio-political change.

The political category most strongly associated with the dominant tradition of dramatic theatre in Latvia is representation. In this context, the role of the Latvian National Theatre must be highlighted, although similar trends with slight variations in subject matter are also to be found in other state-funded theatres in Latvia. The Valmiera Drama Theatre, for example, orients itself towards national dramaturgy and studies of national character; the Daugavpils Theatre focuses on the regional identity of Latgale; etc.

These examples demonstrate how specific representations of identities are often determined by the context. As a regional yet centrally located theatre in Latvia, the Valmiera Theatre mostly reproduces the dominant narratives of national identity in tune with the discourses promoted by the national cultural institutions. The Daugavpils Theatre, on the other hand, works in a marginalised region, hence its apparent unease with

the dominant identities. Originally founded with an ideological goal of creating a centre of Latvian culture in a geographically peripheral cultural space (Latgale, located in the Eastern part of the country, differs significantly from the rest of Latvia in that a specific dialect of the Latvian language is spoken, the dominant religion is Catholicism rather than Protestantism, the region is ethnically diverse and a considerable portion of the population identifies as Russian-speaking, and the region is also relatively poor), the theatre has recently abandoned the aim of implementing the dominant narratives of Latvian identity and is instead working towards a specific and complex regional identity. The theatre houses two companies – a Latvian-speaking and a Russian-speaking one – but in recent years this ethnic division in productions, which is clearly evident in other Latvian dramatic theatres, often disappears, replacing the segregated Latvian and Russian identities with a common Latgalian identity that apparently reflects both the reality in the region and the detachment felt in Latgale in relation to the wider Latvian state, society and culture.²

Latvian National Theatre, in its turn, stands out as the company aiming to create new dominant national narratives.

In this context, it is important to highlight three aspects of representation

that play a significant role in productions of Latvian theatre: the connection to mimetic theatre, the deliberate aim of influencing or transforming, and the emphasis on the community, which is closely dependent on the idea of representation as a political tool aimed at forming a group (often, a society). From 2006 to 2017, the Latvian National Theatre was chaired by Ojārs Rubenis, a popular journalist during the Third National Awakening and later a businessman with strong ties to the political elite, and the theatre was to a certain degree influenced by this perceived closeness to the elite. Under his leadership, the National Theatre experienced two major shifts. First, the theatre overcame a long-lasting creative crisis and managed to become one of the leading companies in Latvia. Secondly, the theatre began promoting its status as a national institution and adjusted its repertoire accordingly. The function of the theatre as the institution creating the national narratives was especially promoted during two centenaries celebrated extensively by the National Theatre, namely, the centenary of the Latvian state in 2018 and the centenary of the National Theatre in 2019, both of which brought generous additional funding to the theatre. The National Theatre focused especially on issues of national history, and its repertoire over the past decade reveals both the changes in social memory in Latvian

1 Reinelt J., Rai, S. M., Introduction, in *The Grammar of Politics and Performance* (London and NewYork: Routledge, 2015), 1.

2 The ongoing debate, whether Latgalian is a regional dialect of Latvian or actually a language of a specific cultural space, continues. In the meantime, the social trend in Daugavpils Theatre is to stage productions played in Latgalian participating the actors from both Latvian- and Russian-speaking troupes.

society and the way theatre becomes a driving force in implementing them.

The first attempts to promote a new discourse on national history by the National Theatre were artistically unsuccessful yet socially significant and are associated with two productions: the musical *The Leader* (Vadonis, 2009, dir. by Edmunds Freibergs) by

the head of the first puppet government of Soviet Latvia and signed the papers ordering the deportation of Latvian people. The two historic personalities were presented on stage in an idealised or demonised manner, respectively, and the productions rather unexpectedly started an intense public discussion about the

representations of the national history and differing understandings of the concept of a nation (nation as an ethnic or political community) expressed by various social groups.

The moral backlash of Latvian society against some of the ideas expressed by these pro-

ductions (especially the Christ-like portrayal of an authoritarian leader, strongly suggesting that democratic values are not necessary if the right kind of leader is found) at first came as a shock to the Latvian National Theatre, and, bearing in mind the theatre's apparent claim of becoming an institution for the whole nation as a single community, the productions might seem unsuccessful. However, the fevered discussions about both productions not as artistic but political texts demonstrated the potential power of a theatrical piece, and the Latvian National Theatre has consistently staged performances about national history ever since, paying attention to a more balanced and complex reading yet at the same time not shying away from ideological positions as long as they

“ In the second decade of the 21st century the representation of the 20th century has gradually changed. The narrative of national suffering, for example, has been replaced by survival stories or even stylised nostalgia interpreting the Soviet period outside of its political contexts.

Zigmārs Liepiņš and Kaspars Dimiters and the production of Māra Zālīte's play *Lācis* (*Lācis*, 2009, dir. by Indra Roga). Both works offered a black-and-white reading of national history. *The Leader* attempted to construct a new model of a national hero, while *Lācis* focused on the creation of the model villain.

The protagonist of *The Leader* is Kārlis Ulmanis, the last prime minister of the first independent Latvian state (1918-1940). The controversy surrounding him stems from the fact that he staged a coup d'état and became an authoritarian head of state, succumbing later to the Soviet occupation without any significant resistance. *Lācis*, on the other hand, tells the story of a popular Latvian writer, Vilis Lācis, who became

do not clash with the general beliefs of its audiences. Thus, the change of plots and interpretations can be viewed as an apparent reaction towards changes in Latvian national identity while also undeniably demonstrating a moderately conservative ideological stance on the part of the theatre.

Crucial to the Latvian National Theatre is the idea of the national state and nation. This is addressed in a number of ways, for example, emphasising national dramaturgy, particularly the works of Rainis. In this context, *Fire and Night* (*Uguns un nakts* 2015, dir. by Viesturs Kairiņš) and *Blow, the Wind!* (*Pūt, vējiņ!* (2019, dir. by Elmārs Seņkovs) must be mentioned. Both were artistic highlights of their respective seasons in Latvian theatre, however, in the context of this article, the important aspects of both productions are the interpretations of the pieces.

Fire and Night interprets the national myth of Lāčplēsis (Bearslayer), a hero of legendary strength who alone protects the Latvian lands and people from foreign aggressors, yet the historical background must also be considered. Rainis wrote the play in 1905, having been deeply moved by the brutal suppression of the 1905 Revolution in the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire. In this context, the battle of Lāčplēsis can be interpreted both as the fight for the Latvian people and as the fight against Russian and German governance. Structurally, however, the plot also reveals parallels with the political circumstances of independent Latvia shortly before the

Second World War, while the stage design encouraged an interpretation of the legend as a story of modern Latvia, identifying a lack of strong leadership and clear political vision as hazards to the national state.

Blow, the Wind! is also a potentially political piece, although the plot concentrates on the doomed love affair between Barba and Uldis, who are unable to overcome social obstacles in their way. The symbolist play relies heavily on the hidden meanings embedded in the characters, and the playwright himself read it as a fable about a society or even state that, unable to combine material and ethical interests, endangers its future. Seņkovs interprets *Blow, the Wind!* through the prism of nostalgia, focusing therefore not on the future but rather on the past. A key element of the stage design is a mixed choir of about a hundred people in stylised folk costumes. The choir serves as a metaphorical synonym for the singing Latvian people (the Third National Awakening has often been dubbed the Singing Revolution). Against this background, individual actors play out Rainis' play, however each of them also has an older double who is periodically involved in the action. The older versions of the protagonists are played by actors of the older generation who portrayed the respective characters in the 1983 film *Blow, the Wind!*, a beloved national masterpiece. Thus, Seņkovs' *Blow, the Wind!* becomes a meta-theatrical performance that draws the audience's attention towards the modes of repetition and also to what can be

described as a mythical “ancient Latvian past”, the unrealistic time of action represented in the film, as well as by the choir, perceived in both the modern and ancient connotation. There is also a strong link to the Soviet period, because all of the older actors are Soviet-era stars of the Latvian stage and screen. By combining the different timelines, Serņkova creates a reading of national identity in which stages of the nation’s development are not only connected but seem almost identical, or at least archetypal. It strongly hints at the cycle-like properties of a myth (in this case, a national myth), in which every action repeats itself again and again.

The idea of a constant repetition of national archetypes in a nearly sacred cyclical pattern is also highlighted by Kirill Serebrennikov’s 2015 interpretation of Ieva Struka’s play about Rainis entitled *Rainis’ Dreams* (*Raiņa sapņi*). From the vast literary heritage of Rainis, it is mostly the texts related to his philosophical and socio-political views that have been selected for performance, with the dream of an independent Latvia becoming the most dominant theme.

However, the national idea at the Latvian National Theatre is not entirely closed to discussion. Compared to the previous decade, when the Latvian National Theatre’s repertoire was dominated by performances focusing on the traumas of Latvian society in the 20th century (occupation, deportation, emigration) and highlighted the tragic inability of the protagonists to influence historical events by por-

traying Latvians only as victims, in the second decade of the 21st century the representation of the 20th century has gradually changed. The narrative of national suffering, for example, has been replaced by survival stories or even stylised nostalgia interpreting the Soviet period outside of its political contexts (for example, Pēteris Pēteršons’ play *I am 30 years old* (*Man 30 gadu*, dir. by Ināra Slucka in 2018). The focus has also shifted from the First and Second National Awakenings (in other words, the formation of the Latvian nation in the second half of the 19th century and the founding of an independent state in 1918) to the Third National Awakening (for instance, Jānis Balodis’ *Under Two Flags* (*Zem diviem karogiem*, 2019). However, the most important trend related to national identity is the reinterpretation of national history in the context of responsibility.

A number of productions address the issue of collaboration or lack of resistance by Latvians during the Second World War and the Soviet occupation. The staging of Māris Bērziņš’ novel *The Taste of Lead* (*Svina garša*, 2016, dir. by Valters Sīlis), for example, is a story about the Holocaust in Latvia, and its lead character is a Latvian man who quite suddenly loses his voice. This physical handicap becomes a symbol of the man’s inability to speak up, make any decisions or choose a side, which leads to his own demise, but only after he has failed to help others in need. A similar protagonist is shown by director Ināra Slucka in the 2019 performance *Cauldron* (*Katls*), written by Aivars Freimanis. In it, the

protagonist dramatically changes the lives of his fellow people in occupied (first by the Nazis, then by the Soviets) Kurzeme simply because he pays no attention to the political circumstances of the time and attempts to lead a strictly self-centred life. Yet another play to be mentioned in this context is *The Forest Man* (*Mežainis*) written by Jānis Balodis and directed by Valters Sīlis in 2018, which tells the story of a national partisan who remains hidden in a forest for the entire period of the Soviet occupation. However, the title character in this piece is not interpreted as an ideological fighter but instead as a cowardly and selfish individual whose inability to take responsibility for his life destroys the fate of his relatives.

In addition, several performances have addressed national issues from the perspective of a marginalised group. One example is *The Wicker Monk* (*Klūgu mūks*, dir. by Indra Roga, 2014) based on the historical novel by Inga Ābele. Although the plot follows various “typical” situations in Latvian history, including the First and the Second National Awakenings, it is told from the perspective of Latgale, emphasising the ambiguity of this region so different from the rest of Latvia. An-

other example is the staging of Siegfried von Vegesack’s autobiographical novel *The Ring of the Baltic* (*Baltiešu gredzens*, originally titled *The Baltic Tragedy* by the author) directed by Viesturs Kairiņš in 2019, which proposes a Baltic German perspective on the first independent Latvian state, in-

terpreting it as the social and cultural downfall of the Baltic provinces.

All the performances mentioned above share several features that characterise the dominant narratives of national identity prevailing in dramatic theatre in Latvia. Although often using diverse aesthetic and technical features of contemporary theatre, the perfor-

mances are mostly dramatic; they are closed and intended for passive audiences, and the represented model of the nation is mostly ethnic. On the other hand, the representation of the Latvian nation has also changed psychologically over the past decade – it is no longer viewed primarily as an endangered group but appears to have gained the status of the majority within a nation state and, as consequence, a relative self-confidence that allows for a certain diversity of interpretations. However, the division between “us” and “them” remains strong and is based on ethnicity. The

“Although often using diverse aesthetic and technical features of contemporary theatre, the performances are mostly dramatic; they are closed and intended for passive audiences, and the represented model of the nation is mostly ethnic.”

Jews and Germans that the protagonists of the Latvian National Theatre plays meet are not part of the Latvian people; instead, they are perceived as marginalised groups that the Latvians interact with and have certain moral obligations toward. It should be noted that the Latvian National Theatre does not represent the identities of the biggest minority in contemporary Latvia – speakers of Russian. On the one hand, this in itself can be viewed as a crucial change of narrative, because previously representatives of Russian ethnicity were mostly portrayed as villains. On the other hand, the Russian-speaking minorities are thus marginalised in the social context, creating a misrepresentation of contemporary Latvian society.

However, another scene offering significantly different representations of identities in contemporary Latvia exists alongside the large state-funded theatres. This scene is concentrated in the independent theatres and consists primarily of the work of the youngest generation of Latvian directors. Although they all also collaborate with the state-funded theatres, it is interesting to note that, with few exceptions, their performances staged in the independent theatres are aimed at tearing down the dominant representations of history and identities.

Director Alvis Hermanis and his so-called Latvian cycle staged at the New Riga Theatre had an important influence on the socio-political direction of the youngest generation of Latvian theatre makers. Hermanis offered several principles that the directors

we will be discussing shortly seem to have followed, especially the use of verbatim and documentary theatre forms, the concept of open dialogic performance and an understanding of the nation as a political instead of ethnic community.

The theatre performances *The Long Life* (*Garā dzīve*, 2003), *Latvian Stories* (*Latviešu stāsti*, 2004), *Latvian Love* (*Latviešu mīlestība*, 2006), *The Sounds of Silence* (*Klusuma skaņas*, 2007), *Marta of Zilaiskalns* (*Zilākalna Marta*, 2009), *Ziedonis and the Universe* (*Ziedonis un Visums*, 2010), *Black Milk* (*Melnais piens*, 2009) and especially *Grandfather* (*Vēctēvs*, 2009) are all part of Hermanis' Latvian cycle and offer a counter-narrative to the dominant narratives. In Hermanis' performances the Latvian nation consists of people of various ethnic groups and political beliefs and, most importantly, their various, contradictory experiences are presented as equal. *Grandfather*, for example, consists of the memories of three veterans of the Second World War: a communist who after the war worked for the KGB, a legionnaire who believes Hitler was one of the greatest men in the history of the world, and a man without any political beliefs who was drafted by both opposing armies and consequently fought on both sides one after the other. The performance does not choose a protagonist or assign function (assistant, villain, etc.) to the characters. Instead, the documentary stories based on interviews with real veterans remain open for discussion and reflection. *Grandfather* is often characterised in Latvia as a healing

performance that succeeded to unite a nation split by 20th-century history.

The younger generation of Latvian theatre directors has adopted most of the previously mentioned attitudes towards the representation of Latvian history. However, they do oppose one. Hermanis' characters are often passive, and his performances offer a juxtaposition of "everyman" and the grand narratives of politics or culture that, of course, prove to be unaffected if challenged. But the younger generation questions the historical accuracy of this interpretation. The passivity of protagonists is therefore often juxtaposed with the question of ethics, and the audience is often tasked with the responsibility of not only interpreting but also evaluating the narratives and representations provided from a contemporary point of view.

In this context, *Legionnaires* (*Leģionāri*) directed by Valters Sīlis in 2011 at Ģertrūdes ielas teātris (Gertrude Street Theatre) became one of the most important performances of the past decade in Latvia. It is the first theatre performance in which the trends that would dominate Latvia's independent scene for at least a decade to come can be clearly identified. The performance is based on the Swedish writer Per Olov Enquist's book about a group of Latvian legionnaires who sought asylum in Sweden as refugees after the Second World War but were extradited to the Soviet Union. Sīlis also used archive materials from the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. The performance features characteristics common to the works of the

youngest generation of theatre artists in Latvia.

Legionnaires transcends the boundaries of the ethnic group's memories and offers the perspectives of marginalised groups in relation to the "national questions" as equally important. Yet it is important that they cannot mutually reconcile. *Legionnaires* is a multilingual performance; the text is narrated in Latvian, Swedish, German, English, Russian and Finnish, and it emphasises the inaccessibility, chaos and incomprehensiveness of history because no one in the audience (or, indeed, the performance itself) speaks all of the languages.

Another essential feature of the performance is its attempt to revisit the dominant narratives. Latvian legionnaires, traditionally represented as seasoned patriots who disgraced themselves by fighting on the Nazi side in the hope of saving the Latvian nation from Soviet occupation, are portrayed here as teenagers who most often do not have any political beliefs and are only interested in smoking, women and coarse jokes. The legionnaires are generally not viewed in the context of a contemporary reading of the national history but instead in an isolated manner and focusing on the controversial aspects of their history, notably the participation of certain legionnaires in the Holocaust.

Legionnaires also gives an active role to the audience. The actors repeatedly turn to the audience with various requests, such as to participate in an episode on the stage, to read something, to vote for or against

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There are two important elements in the show: the interactivity that turns the audience into participants, and the selection of the stories themselves.



Tanya's Birthday
(*Taņas dzimšanas diena*)
Gertrude Street Theatre

Photo: Elmārs Sedols

the extradition of the legionnaires to the Soviet Union, etc. If the action of the audience differs from the historical truth, the actor comments: "So, you want to change the history?" The seeming absurdity of the idea of changing history highlights both the mechanisms of effectively changing history (or at least its representation, and therefore also its meaning) and the differences between contemporary and historical perspectives. The idea of active remembering and the active formulation of one's attitude as well as a constructed and therefore fluid narrative of history (more broadly, identity) are among the dominant themes in Latvian theatre in the second decade of the 21st century.

Legionnaires is a stellar example of a widespread trend in Latvian theatre of the previous decade with young directors staging aesthetically diverse performances that create counter-narratives. In other words, they are aware of the dominant narrative and deliberately break it. The young directors choose topics typical for the representation of Latvian history, but they offer interpretations that crucially differ from the dominant narratives. This process demonstrates an eagerness to revisit identity issues and the relationship between the centre and the margins. Apparently, this is how the younger generation expresses its discomfort with existing norms and reflects on the changing nature of national identity and national narratives, especially when discussing marginalised groups and topics. It is interesting to note that, in some cases, discourses typical of the Soviet era are

returning to Latvian culture, not because of any ideological preferences but because they are often the direct opposite of the dominant discourses of independent Latvia and are therefore marginalised.

Several performances dealing with national discourses and counter-discourses have been staged by Mārtiņš Eihe. For example, in 2016 he directed the play *Tanya's Birthday* (*Taņas dzimšanas diena*) at Ģertrūdes ielas teātris using a collection of memories collected from Latvian people by the Goethe Institute in Riga. In the performance, the audience sits around a table as if at a family gathering – as if they are guests at a birthday party. The performance consists of toasts – small stories and recollections of the 20th century – performed by the actors and lengthy pauses during which audience members are encouraged to share their own memories and stories. There are two important elements in the show: the interactivity that turns the audience into participants, and the selection of the stories themselves. In *Tanya's Birthday*, the memories of Latvia (as opposed to Latvians) can be heard, and often the most beautiful moments are linked to people who in the context of contemporary Latvia would be interpreted, for example, as Soviet aggressors.

Likewise, the topic of Valters Silis' performance *Liepāja – the Capital City of Latvia* (*Liepāja – Latvijas galavaspilsēta*, Liepāja Theatre, 2018) is 1918, the year when the Latvian state was first established. However, despite the fact that the performance was dedicated to the centenary of the Latvian

state, it did not emphasise any patriotic sentiments, instead highlighting the horrors of wartime: death, famine, disease, despair. Silis bases his performance on actual historical texts found in newspaper articles from 1918, and the national state established in November of that year is barely mentioned despite the fact that it is, of course, a central element of any contemporary account of the history of that period.

When directing the theatre performance *Father Hero '69* (*Tēvs varonis '69*, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2016) written by Inga Gaile), and directed by Dāvis Auškāps shows the protagonist – a KGB agent of Latvian origin – as a melodramatic hero dealing with some family drama and ignoring his professional role altogether. Dmitrijs Petrenko in his *The Last Pioneer* (*Pēdējais pionieris*, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2016) talks about Russian youth growing up during the Third National Awakening. While the Latvian state regains independence, the heroes in his play feel growing alienation and despair and conclude that their future is being taken away from them.

The theatre performance directed by Silis is based on press archives; Gaile's piece is a partially autobiographic story of the playwright's family history; Petrenko's performance is based on verbal interviews. In all examples one can feel a strong desire to create a more authentic and multifold perspective on the history of Latvia, and this urge in many cases is related to the complex identities of the authors themselves. The inability to deal with

one's history simultaneously means the inability to find one's place in contemporary Latvia.

This sentiment is perhaps most vividly expressed in *Flea Market of Souls* (*Dvēseļu utenis*, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2017) directed by Inga Tropa and written by Justīne Kļava. The piece, whose title is a play on words – *Blizzard of Souls* (*Dvēseļu putenis*) being a national staple, a patriotic novel about the First World War that culminates in the creation of independent Latvia – is a contemporary snapshot of Latvian realities. The story takes place in a communal apartment rented by exchange students somewhere in Riga. The protagonists are twenty-year-old Europeans (two Latvians, a Russian, a Pole, an Austrian, a Roma) who argue about household chores, but any discussion they start inevitably develops into verbal assaults consisting of national stereotypes, the recounting of national traumas (especially in the context of the Second World War), etc. They only reach consensus when discussing the attitude they feel toward their respective histories – all of them feel overwhelmed, and while they are unable to escape their histories, none feel really connected to them and acknowledge that they weaponise stereotypes simply as a tool for their everyday communication needs. "What should I do with it?" they keep asking, one by one retelling their national and family histories, which do not serve them but are simply an inherited burden.

Identities, especially marginalised ones, often become the themes of theatre performances. The fact that

identities are often connected with topics of national history demonstrates how painful the issue of national identity is in Latvian society. Mārtiņš Eihe is a director who manifests this situation strikingly. In 2011, he directed Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (under the title *Viss par mīlestību* [Everything About Love], the Nomadi creative association), which explains the hatred between families as the result of belonging to different ethnicities, in this case Latvians and Russians. In 2018 Eihe directed a staging of Sanita Reinsone's study *Daughters of the Forest* (*Meža meitas*, Valmiera Drama Theatre), which tells about women who hid in the forests together with partisans after the Second World War. The material draws attention to another marginalised group, namely, women in war. Here, too, the context of national history is unavoidable.

Finally, Vladislavs Nastavševs, one of the most outstanding directors of the new generation in Latvia, has to be mentioned. In his theatre performances, particularly *The Lake of Hopes* (*Cerību ezers*, 2015) and *The Lake of Hopes is Frozen* (*Cerību ezers aizsalis*, 2018), both staged at the New Riga Theatre, he examines his own identity as a marginalised person in Latvian society from numerous perspectives. Nastavševs is homosexual, Russian and feels humiliated by his "Soviet history", having been brought up in the 1980s as the grandson of a Soviet

officer and the son of a single mother. The feeling of being an outsider and the inability to identify with the majority culture is a very strong feature in the work of this director, who in practical terms is fully integrated in Latvian society, and can be viewed not only as the personal feeling of an individual artist but also as a valuable insight into

“What should I do with it?” they keep asking, one by one retelling their national and family histories, which do not serve them but are simply an inherited burden.

the marginalised groups of Latvians he identifies with and that are usually not represented on Latvian stages.

In conclusion, a few socio-political performances that have tried to address issues unrelated to history must be noted. They are surprisingly few in number, but each has had a significant cultural footprint.

The theatre performance *The Expelled* (*Izraidītie*) written by Lithuanian playwright Marjūs Ivaškevičius and localised and directed by his compatriot Oskaras Koršunovas at the Daile Theatre became an unexpected hit in 2014 based on its subject – the economic migration of Latvians to Great Britain in the early 21st century. Another performance, singled out by its topic, is Alvis Hermanis' *History*



History Research Commission
(Vēstures izpētes komisija)
New Riga Theatre

Photo: Jānis Deinats

Research Commission (Vēstures izpētes komisija) in 2019, a study dedicated to the partial publicising of the lists of KGB informers. Also of note are three performances directed by Valters Silis: Juha Jokela's play *Finlandization* (2019, Latvian National Theatre), Jānis Balodis' *Veiksmes stāsts* (*Success Story*, Latvian National Theatre, 2016) and *10 Years Since Operation "Liberation of Iraq"* (*Operācijai "Irākas atbrīvošana" - 10 gadi*, Homo Novus Festival, 2013), which deal with the economic and political dependence on Russia, the economic policies of Latvia during the global economic crisis at the expense of the country's most vulnerable citizens, and Latvia's involvement in the Iraq War, respectively.

All these performances are dedicated to major social and political events of the 20th century in Latvia that have often scarred the nation, and they manifest a political intent on the part of the theatre makers to at least promote a discussion in society about their respective topics. However, the fact that there are so few such performances to be mentioned emphasises that socio-political themes are not at the centre of attention in Latvian theatres. This tendency seems to correspond to the general scepticism of Latvian society regarding its ability to influence political and state administrative processes. At the same time, however, issues relating to an individual's own life (memory, identity) are of interest to both theatres and audiences.

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New Performance Spaces and Redefinition of the Relationship between Performers and Audience Members in 21st-Century Latvian Theatre: 2010-2020

As with other theatre cultures in Europe, the 21st century has brought numerous crucial changes to stage practices in Latvia as well. The multifaceted manifestations of these changes could be defined as “transcending the boundaries” between various art disciplines, between an artist and a work of art, between a work of art and its viewer, between art and life. Such transcending of boundaries can be noticed in all dimensions of theatre, including the spatial dimension.

“Theatre space is not so much a given, but rather a concept produced by a specific spatial practice,” claims British theatre historian David Wiles.¹ In other words, when discussing issues that are related to theatre and space, we need to distinguish between the

space as a physical place that exists before and after the performance, and the performance space where the theatre performance takes place. The physical space is always the performance space of the acting as well. Each individual use of the physical space creates the performance space and a specific spatiality that provides a special opportunity for developing a relationship between the actors and the audience.

To ensure an overview of recent practice in Latvian theatre in terms of extending the boundaries of the theatre space, it seems relevant to find some points of departure. When discussing the strategies that can be used to increase the performative potential of a space, or, in other words, how to make the chosen space an efficient co-actor

“ Each individual use of the physical space creates the performance space and a specific spatiality that provides a special opportunity for developing a relationship between the actors and the audience.



Miss Julie (Jūlijas jaunkundze)
Valmiera Drama Theatre

Photo: Matīss Markovskis

¹ Wiles, D., *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 159.

in the performance, German theatre historian Erika Fischer-Lichte points to three alternatives, which can also be observed in theatre practice in Latvia:

...first, the use of an (almost) empty space or one with variable arrangements allowing for the unrestricted movement of actors and spectators; second, the creation of spatial arrangements enabling so far unexplored possibilities for the negotiation of relationships between actors and spectators, movement and perception; and third, the experimentation with given spaces usually fulfilling other purposes.²

Latvian director Mārtiņš Eihe has frequently made use of the poetic potential of an empty or almost empty space, both inside and outside the theatre. One of his early works, *The Blind* (*Les Aveugles*), might not stand out with high artistic value; however, it had the charm of a brave experiment.

In 2005, the *Homo Novus* festival organised by the New Theatre Institute of Latvia offered a special programme for emerging directors entitled *Prove* (*Try-Out*). The event was held on the premises of the former furniture factory *Grīvas Mēbeles*, where Eihe directed Belgian symbolist playwright Maurice Maeterlinck's one-act play *The Blind*, a metaphorical vision of how a man feels in an indifferent, mysterious world.

There were no sets, no props, no seats for audience members in the empty hall – only the bare brick walls of the former factory. The actors spoke Maeterlinck's texts and moved around in the space as if blind, bumping into members of the audience, who pressed themselves up against the walls and feebly tried to preserve the sense of collectiveness that is characteristic of traditionally seated audiences. The actors, in turn, deliberately butted in and broke up the groups of audience members that had formed. The audience's perception was influenced by their location in the room. It made a difference whether they stood in the middle of a group of other audience members or on the periphery, whether they were in direct physical contact with an actor or whether they were pushed away. With their unpredictable actions, the actors and audience members created a continuously changing spatiality. This seemed to be the main achievement of the theatre performance, which, using French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's terminology, created a lived, experienced space (*le vécu* in French). Consequently, it is not the external "entity" that people fill and transform, but rather the subject, which affects our social lives and us.³

It seems that space was not used in such a radical way in Latvian theatre in the second decade of the 21st century,

namely, by confusing audience members and making them feel awkward because they had to avoid actors. However, directors experimented by constructing situations in which the actors and audience members gained physical and social experience in different ways in an empty or almost empty room. The actress and director Liena Šmukste (b. 1976) created *Book Mark* (*Grāmata Zīme*, 2019) as a sensory theatre performance that was experienced by the audience whilst blindfolded. Thus, they perceived the surrounding world through hearing the actors speak as well as through touch, sound and smell. Because the performance was based on a story about books that were banned during the Soviet period and that had been hidden, confiscated or destroyed, the "blindness" of the audience also bore symbolic meaning – to not see means to exist in spiritual darkness, to lack knowledge, to be isolated from the wisdom of books.

But no less important is how a visually impaired person feels physical and social space. The visual experience, as we know, is crucial in the perception of spatial information. When one loses one's sight, one loses the sense of the size and scale of a room, the obstacles found with-

in it, the direction of movement. The individual feels disoriented, stressed, panicked and scared of getting lost. Although Šmukste's performance contained many instances of inaccurate data and misleading assumptions, the authors of the performance succeeded in evoking the repressive atmosphere of the Soviet period through the spatial confusion they created among the audience members. Similarly, the principle of the theatre of the senses developed by Lithuanian director Karolina Žernyte was used in *Pyramid* (*Piramīda*, 2018) directed by Viesturs Roziņš, in which the audience experienced life as a blind person as well as a peculiar kind of co-existence with others by cooperating, blindfolded, with a partner sitting across from them and at the same time listening along to instructions on headphones.

The second strategy mentioned by Fischer-Lichte – specific, innovative spatial arrangements as an instrument for creating new relationship models between actors and the audience – was used in Latvian theatre of the 21st century much more frequently than the performative potential of an empty space. Two theatre performances made thirteen years apart but in

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Innovative spatial arrangements as an instrument for creating new relationship models between actors and the audience – was used in Latvian theatre of the 21st century much more frequently than the performative potential of an empty space.

2 Fischer-Lichte, E., *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 110.

3 Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 11–12.

the same space can be discussed as a case study of this strategy.

Alvis Hermanis, the most internationally renowned Latvian theatre director, directed *Ice: Collective Reading of a Book with the Help of the Imagination* (*Ledus. Kolektīva grāmatas lasīšana ar iztēles palīdzību*) () in 2005. The theatre performance was based on Russian cult writer Vladimir Sorokin's work, which in an ironic, even sarcastic tone narrates a story about the events initiated by a brotherhood of strange, blond, blue-eyed people, all of which evolve against the backdrop of 20th-century history. The performance was the last event in a three-part international project, the first two parts of which were performed in Germany (Gladbeck and Frankfurt). The Riga version was performed at Talsu iela 1 in the Pārdaugava district of the Latvian capital, away from the main premises of the New Riga Theatre in the city centre.

For the purpose of the performance, an arena-like performance space was created in the centre of the hall. The audience, in turn, was seated in rows of chairs arranged in close concentric circles around the arena. It must be noted that Latvian theatre audiences usually feel uncomfortable when actors make them engage and participate in the construction of the theatre reality. Hermanis respected this, and the actors did not touch the audience members or ask them to answer questions or perform any actions. Audience members were, however, given three types of "hand-outs" during the performance: albums of old

photographs, albums containing pornographic comic books and albums with photographs of people hugging. Enlarged photographs made by stage designer Monika Pormale of people hugging in a swimming pool, a library and an urban landscape were also displayed on the walls of the hall and served as an extension of the performative space.

At the same time, the historically recognisable spatial arrangement with reference to an ancient theatre or circus was innovative, because Hermanis used it in order to change theatre viewing habits. Almost throughout the entire performance, with the exception of the final episode, both the performance space and the audience space were illuminated by a bright emergency light. As a result, not only did the processes of the theatre performance become visible to the audience, but also the viewing process itself: the reactions of fellow audience members when faced with the provocative reality of the performance; their interested or, on the contrary, dismissive facial expressions when receiving the albums of pornographic drawings from the actors. This double focus encouraged the audience members to look at themselves and their attitudes towards the reality of the performance. However, this theatre experience was not directly affected by the history of the venue, as was the case thirteen years later, when *Club "Paradise"* (*Klubs "Parādīze"*, (2018) was performed in the same location.

In a project developed with the independent Dirty Deal Teatro, director Paula Plavniece and playwright

Justīne Kļava intended to tell a story about people in Latvia in the 1990s, albeit focusing on a specific place and its history.⁴

Club "Paradise" opened with an exposition in which the four actresses presented to the audience the intention of the performance and the adjustments that had been made to the original narrative about the role of women in contemporary society. These changes were made due to the fact that the performance was being staged in a building that had housed a nightclub and casino in the 1990s along with all the ensuing problems. It therefore made sense that the family business of the play's protagonists – a brunch café where one could play music, dance and at the same time argue about relationships and discuss the core values of life – corresponded at least partially with the criminal history of the entertainment venue.

For the purposes of this performance, artist Kate Krolle (b. 1984) fitted the small performance space with signs characteristic of nightlife venues. Colourful squares were illuminated on the floor, a palm tree folded from a green neon tube annoyingly glowed in the background, musical instruments were arranged along the

edges of the space, and a table and chairs (furniture commonly found in cafés and apartments and which can change function depending on their location) were placed at the centre. The arrangement of the audience as well as its relation to the performance processes was traditional, yet its perception capacity was fundamentally influenced by the reference included in the performance and the performance space addressing the venue's history. A reference to the history of a venue can also be found in the creative biography of director Valters Sīlis, who directed a play for school-aged youth titled *Meeting Place: Riga City Theatre II* (*Tikšanās vieta – Rīgas pilsētas II teātris*) at the Latvian National Theatre in 2018. In this work the audience was playfully engaged in a simulation of the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia.

Fischer-Lichte's third spatiality strategy was most commonly used in Latvian theatre in the second decade of the 21st century. According to this strategy, theatre productions make use of all the opportunities provided by spaces originally intended for other purposes. It must be noted, however, that the performative potential of such "found spaces" differs and is used in a

4 The building at Talsu iela 1, which is an extension of the Eduards Smiļģis Theatre Museum, was originally built for the needs of the Theatre Society of the Latvian SSR and housed the office of its chairman as well as other administrative offices. Various events related to theatre were organised here, such as discussions about theatre performances, academic conferences and concerts. In the 1990s, after Latvia regained independence, a lack of financial means led to a situation in which the premises became an entertainment venue for semi-criminal and criminal circles. This came to an end when a new performance space for the New Riga Theatre was established at Talsu iela, named the Music and Theatre Museum Hall. Soon afterwards, the independent Dirty Deal Teatro moved into the premises.



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A trip from one place to another means a new perspective, crossing borders and, of course, the extension of space.

Ladies (Dāmas)
Theatre TT

Photo: Jānis Deinats

myriad of ways. Often a found space is not suited for theatre plays, but its function in real life nevertheless corresponds to the function planned in the respective theatre performance.

In 2014, in a collaborative project between the Latvian National Theatre and Riga 2014 (the foundation that managed the programme for Riga as the European Capital of Culture), Valters Sīlis directed a cycle of four performances called *Glory and Misery of the Schengen Area* (*Šengenas zonas spožums un posts*). In it, directors of four different nationalities – Lithuanian director Vidas Bareikis (b. 1986), German director Julian Heckel (b. 1984), Portuguese director Márcia Lança (b. 1980) and Icelandic collective Kviss Búmm Bang (founded in 2009) – drew attention to the means of expression of performance and explored the boundaries of contemporary theatre. The aim of the cycle was to make viewing theatre an open process in which, pursuant to the definition of performance, a crucial role (if not even the key role) is given to the viewer. For example, before Lança's performance *Glory and Misery* each audience member was given a badge depicting a fox, beaver or eagle, dividing the audience into three groups which were then taken on a tour around the Latvian National Theatre building, starting with the labyrinths in its basement and ending on the second balcony. The actors in this performance-tour became tour guides who gave new meaning to the visited space with the help of stories and the viewers themselves (for example, on a physical level, the audience members were taken down

to the theatre's basement; however, in the context of the performance itself, the action took place at the European Parliament). The boundary between life and theatre – or real and imaginary space – was also transcended in Heckel's performance *Catching RABIT* (*Noķert RABIT*). Each audience member viewed the performance while seated next to a complete stranger inside a narrow cabin built especially for the performance, thus taking the viewers outside their comfort zone. The performance was moderated by an estranged, recorded voice, and the "stage" was the street seen outside the cabin's windows – Kronvalda boulevard and the people and tram passing by. The voice of the moderator drew the viewers' attention to various activities on the street or in the windows of the building opposite the theatre. The cityscape seen through the window was also included in the performance, and the viewers were encouraged to question the actual and staged signs.

A similar example can be found in the theatre performance *Ladies*, (*Dāmas*, 2016) directed by Inga Tropa. In it, the action took place in an apartment on the fifth floor of an Art Nouveau building in central Riga that was specifically selected for the purposes of the performance. Audience members were allowed to familiarise themselves with the apartment not only during the performance but also after it, when they were invited to walk through the rooms and enjoy some tea and apple pie. During the performance, however, the audience was seated in several rows, similarly to the traditional arrangement in a theatre.

The theatre performance opened with a video projection on a wall. The audience could hear a quiet, monotonous sound, and the camera took them through the rooms, showing a framed sign on the wall that read "Please switch off your mobile phones". The next sign read "Thank you!" Another sign read "Please be warned that guns will be heard during the performance". Thus, the organisers of the performance established the rules of the game and informed the audience members that they could rely not only on their sensory perception but also on the video camera of camerawoman Elina Matvejeva, which played a crucial role in organising the narrative of the performance.

The camera acted like the eye of an audience member – the audience entered whichever room the camera took them to, thus facilitating the audience's movement through the space. On the other hand, the camera's total control over the audience's eye allowed it to restrict what that eye saw. The camera made audience members focus on specific details or step back and look again from a distance, contemplating which characters would connect and how in order to shape the development and rhythm of the performance.

Taking into account that we see and perceive more intensely and differently whilst travelling than when at home, directors have often turned to the road movie method. A trip from one place to another means a new perspective, crossing borders and, of course, the extension of space, which a director can evoke by including ur-

ban and suburban environments in a theatre performance.

A trip as a basis for performance art was implemented in the cultural and art environment of Latvia in the 1980s, when performance artists Hardijs Lediņš (1955-2004) and Juris Boiko (1954-2002), who founded *The Workshop of Unprecedented Feelings*, (*Nebijušu sajūtu restaurācijas darbnīca* or NSRD, founded in 1982), organised annual walks along the railroad tracks from Riga to Bolderāja, a neglected neighbourhood in the Riga suburbs. The walks, which took place early in the morning or in the evening, allowed the participants to experience the changes in daylight as well as unplanned events and situations in the mutual interaction between man and the environment.

In the 21st century, too, Latvian theatre has been employing the creative potential of a walk. In 2018, four young actors founded the KVADRIFRONS theatre collective, which found a home in the old Riga Circus building. One of the first projects carried out by the troupe was a special performance-tour called *Touched by a Miracle* (*Brīnuma skartie*), during which audience members had the opportunity to walk through all the levels and rooms of the circus building and explore its history with the help of an audio guide. Before the performance, each of the twenty audience members was given a serial number, a high-visibility vest and a protective helmet with a light source and headphones, through which the voice of the audio guide gave instructions as to which route to choose, where to linger longer and

what kind of actions to perform. Each of the spectators thus obtained an individual experience, which can perhaps be interpreted with the concept of immersive theatre, which, although common on a global scale, is used rather rarely in Latvia. According to theatre critic Līga Ulberte, "It is theatre in which the viewer is transformed from a passive observer into an active participant, engaging both physically and emotionally in a situation dictated by a specific space outside the theatre. Conceptually, a boundary between the participants and audience members is demolished and, even if the viewer has not been given a role in the construction of the story, his or her unpredictable response may have an impact on it."⁵

The performance-tour format was also followed in *Mārupīte River* (*Mārupīte*, 2012), a project directed by Valters Sīlis and Jānis Balodis which manifested itself as a three-hour walk along the banks of the Mārupīte River – through wooded areas and undergrowth as well as residential areas, where both blocks of apartments and private houses could be seen. The tour ended in the sculpture garden established by sculptor Indulis Ranka. The Mārupīte environmental accident served as the catalyst for the tour. The disaster was caused by a fire that started in a warehouse for chemical substances and resulted in extensive water pollution and ecological damage, dead fish and a break in the local water supply.

Twenty people took part in the tour. The group was guided by Sīlis, who lives near the Mārupīte River and shared his experience and memories of this part of suburban Riga. Balodis, the playwright of the performance, explained how he had tried to learn about the history of the leakage of chemical substances. The walk had a combination of planned stops (where the audience was greeted by a musical performance, a presentation about the history of the Mārupīte River or the demonstration of an object) and unplanned interaction with real life. For example, a drunkard was interested in the aim of the walk, another passerby simply wanted to have a chat, and another one wished to join the tour. Under these circumstances it would be difficult for an observer to distinguish between the actors and spectators – anyone who briefly joined the walk could become both an actor and a spectator.

In 2016 director Krista Burāne took a new step in the direction of interactive theatre with the documentary performance *Borders* (*Robežas*), in which the action evolved in a block of apartments nicknamed the Great Wall of China in one of Riga's so-called "sleeping neighbourhoods". The performance included a trip on public transport, "audience members" being blindfolded and then walking around the apartments, listening to stories told by the inhabitants about how they had experienced various border situations in their lives – social, emotional,

5 Ulberte, L., *Noķeriet divpadsmi trušu*, Diena, 27/10/2018.

physical – thus allowing people to learn about about the variety of individual experiences that exist right next to us, in the neighbourhood, yet in a seemingly parallel space. *Borders* was a tour both in the urban environment and in the consciousness of the viewers, letting them become aware of different types of communication, points of connection between an art experience and the reality of life, and also the boundaries of mutual trust.

One of the most ambitious events in the genre of performance-tour was *Fortress* (Cietoksnis, 2017), co-authored by Krista Burāne and Mārtiņš Eihe, whose historical prototype, similarly to the *Mārupīte* project, could be traced back to medieval street processions with *tableaux vivants* at certain stops. In medieval society the theatre procession served as an instrument of diplomacy in order to honour rulers and foreign guests. Nowadays, this tool is used to explore the human being and contemporary life.

Fortress invited the audience to travel through various information spaces in order to experience the complexity of the world. The venue of the performance was the Daugavgrīva Fortress, which has a long history and special aura.⁶ The “actors” in this performance were the inhabitants of the Bolderāja

and Daugavgrīva neighbourhoods, which are known for their high level of crime. The performance started on the banks of the Daugava River at Strēlnieku Square in central Riga, where each spectator was given a raincoat, a flashlight and a laminated sheet of paper with the travel route. Then they boarded an old bus for the approximately half-hour drive to the fortress. Through the dusty windows of the bus they noticed various signs along the way: *Furniture from Belarus*, *Gambling House Phoenix*, *Top Store*. As they approached their destination, they saw abandoned industrial sites and docks with buildings like fingers lifted up into the air. A group of assistants welcomed the spectators at the last stop. In constantly changing groups of two, three or four people they went from one point marked on the map to the next one. A siren, which was a sign often used also by performance artists of the 1960s, signalled the beginning and end of the time to be spent at each point.

A road always means new experiences and knowledge. In addition, these experiences and knowledge essentially differ from those one may obtain when sitting passively in a chair and allowing a flow of images drift by. At the Daugavgrīva Fortress, the “images”

were right there, on site. When a viewer of the performance approached these images, unexpected things and processes came into view along with the object that was intended by the authors of the performance. Careful to not stumble over the fragments of a wall, the viewers crawled into the ruins and dungeon of the fortress and wandered along paths through the bushes or thick grass. At each stop they were met either by an individual whose story had to be heard, or a bluish light that shone over the viewers while they quietly contemplated what they had heard and seen.

narrow rooms where the audience sits a metre away from the performers to the entire city as the site of a performance, which the audience experiences through the windows of a bus.

The examples discussed above provide evidence that Latvian theatre in the second decade of the 21st century significantly distanced itself from the proscenium stage as the prevalent model of theatre. Theatre directors strategically chose specific venues and spaces so that a certain type of contact could be created between an actor and an audience member, en-

“ Latvian theatre in the second decade of the 21st century significantly distanced itself from the proscenium stage as the prevalent model of theatre.

Since 2016, the Valmiera Summer Theatre Festival has also explored the opportunities provided by environmental theatre. Initiated by artist and director Reinis Suhanovs (b. 1985), the festival has become an annual event that mainly attracts young-generation teams of directors, actors, stage designers and playwrights from Latvia as well as special guests from abroad. The theatre performances at the festival are original works adapted by the creative teams to the specific venues of the performances. Theatre performances can be experienced both in enclosed indoor spaces (garage, hangar, furniture store, firefighters’ depot, nightclub, empty swimming pool, etc.) and open spaces outdoors (forest, meadow, under a bridge, etc.). In size, the venues range from very tiny,

couraging the audience member to actively experience the performance situation, as opposed to being a passive observer of the actors’ actions. New performance spaces were tested in former factories, schools, private apartments, station buildings, market halls, parks, suburbs, libraries and fortresses – places that are filled with memories, where the sense of space arises not only from their use by actors and audiences but also from the atmosphere and history of the particular space. Both in theatre and beyond, the use of space makes it necessary to redefine the relationship between actors and audiences by breaking down the boundaries between them and creating a community in which the roles of the actors and audience overlap.

6 The fortress in the Daugava River estuary, where the Bulļupe River meets the Daugava, was built by the Swedes in the 17th century and in subsequent years served as fortifications, a military base and also a prison. In the Soviet period, units of the Soviet Navy’s Baltic Fleet were based at the fortress. After the restoration of Latvia’s independence, it has become a platform for cultural activities. The large fortress includes barracks, warehouses, gunpowder magazines and defensive ditches dug all around the territory. Before the theatre performance, the creative team organised communal clean-up events at the fortress in order to improve the degraded environment.

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Latvian Theatre in the Digital Age

“ We should all be concerned about the future because we will have to spend the rest of our lives there.¹

Charles F. Kettering, American inventor and engineer

Currently, the civilised world is split into two realities. At one extreme, people worship the endless possibilities of digital technology. At the other extreme, they predict a looming apocalypse caused by technology. Theatres, including Latvian theatres, mirror such collisions of the contemporary ethos. Theoretically, one could distinguish three different movements. Some believe that digital technologies are the philosophical foundation and practical tool of a future theatre. Others, on principle, are attempting to preserve

unmediated contact between the actor and spectator (“What a piece of work is a man!”²). And finally, the third and largest segment moderately infuse technology into the organisation of space in theatrical production or utilise several principles of the language of the digital media, all the while preserving the dominance of the actor as a physical and psychological being. Nonetheless, when considering the environment of theatre as a whole, one notices a slight confusion caused by the current ethos. Accordingly, theatres are engaging in

¹ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/03/28/future/>

² Shakespeare, W., *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2.



The Bride of the Grass Snake
(*Zalkša līgava*)
New Riga Theatre

Photo: Jānis Deinats

experimentation and testing their audiences, and the perception of the audience grown up in the digital age differs significantly from their predecessors: "Digital Natives are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite."³

The potential and risks of digimodernism

The first expressions of digimodernism can be found at the turn of the 20th / 21st century. The advancement of the Internet era changed the way people communicate all around the world. In Europe, like everywhere else, digitalisation and video technology steadily grew to influence almost every aspect of our lives. It should come as no surprise that, in an attempt to react to changing audiences, the digital age influenced the arts as well. Some ten years ago, British cultural critic Alan Kirby defined the concept of *digimodernism* as a cluster of

aesthetic characteristics derived from computer processing that acquires unique features in each new context. Its main feature lies in the emphasis of visual aspects as a new form of textuality.⁴ Digimodernism is based on and connected with modernism. The aesthetics of new media resemble the aesthetics of the leftist avant-garde of the 20th century. For example, Bertolt Brecht's strategy of intentionally revealing the conditions of the formation of an illusion is included in hardware and software,⁵ while the user of the computer would correspond to Walter Benjamin's concept of perception in a state of entertainment, when the progress of technologies "for the first time had freed up the human hand from important artistic tasks, relinquishing them only for the perception of the eyes."⁶ Moreover, Kirby's concept fits right into the semiotics of the theatre, because in the theatre the concept of *text* is understood not only as a written or spoken word but as a totality of all elements (or conveyors of the meaning) of the entire theatrical production. Thus, the centrality of the verbal text is diminished.⁷

Likewise, since the last decade of the 20th century, European theatres have employed various technologies that allow artists and directors to expand the possibilities of expression on the stage. Such technologies (mainly video) are primarily incorporated as a component of scenography. However, occasionally technology is not used merely as a tool to create the form of a theatre production. In such cases, technology tends to become a co-creator of the content. Latvian theatres began using video a little later, probably due to financial reasons. In

2005, the Performers' Night Award (*Spēlmaņu nakts* - Latvian National Theatre Award) for best debut went to director Mārtiņš Eihe for his production of Gunārs Priede's play *The Blue* (*Zilā*) at the Liepāja Theatre. The stage was enhanced with several televisions synchronously broadcasting a video by Carl Björnsmark depicting a calf hanging out the window of a car. During the finale, the image shown on the televisions was blurred in red and combined with a screeching sound. This symbolised the main message of the play: nobody is immune from encountering tragic accidents.⁸

Currently, theatre productions are using video projectors, animation, virtual reality simulators and various other technologies. Projections are

an indispensable component of cinematography. However, they can be used in theatres as well, in order to create a realistic background or, on the contrary, to build a surreal, magical environment. Although the images on screens are two-dimensional,

“Technologies add a completely new level of symbolic meaning for audiences to decode, provided that the spectator perceives the projections and actors' performance as a single, integrated whole.

projections may enlarge the three-dimensional space of the theatre by revealing different angles, close-up shots, or by constructing entirely different spatiality. When done correctly, such technologies add a completely new level of symbolic meaning for audiences to decode, provided that the spectator perceives the projections and actors' performance as a single, integrated whole. Audio-visual installations frequently utilise projection mapping - a technique of projecting video on various forms and objects. For example, the play *Beasty Love* (*Zvēriņā mīla*, 2017) at the Dirty Deal Teatro projected the image of an animal cemetery upon the naked body of an actor. Technology makes it possible to change the stage layout within

3 Prensky, M. *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*. [https://marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky-Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants-Part.1 pdf](https://marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky-Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants-Part.1.pdf)

4 Kirby, A., *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 50-72.

5 Manovich, L., *Global Algorithm 1.3: The Aesthetics of Virtual Worlds: Report From Los Angeles*, Publishing Service, 1996. http://ctheory.net/ctheory_wp/global-algorithm-1-3-the-aesthetics-of-virtual-worlds-report-from-los-angeles/

6 Benjamins, V., *Mākslasdarbs tā tehniskās reproducējamības laikmetā*, trans. Ivars Ījabs, in *Illuminācijas* (Rīga: Laikmetīgās mākslas centrs, 2005), 154. Original: Benjamin, W., *L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée*, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* V, (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1936), 40-68.

7 Pavis, P., *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance and Film* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 199.

8 According to an online conversation with Carl Björnsmark, 01/29/2020.

a few seconds, thus broadening the potential of scenography. Ināra Slucka was one of the first directors to utilise such potential in the play *Quoting Lost Time* (*Zudušo laiku citējot*, Latvian National Theatre, 2016). In this production, the screen played a central role in the scenography by Kristīne Abika, with the actors' performance on stage alternating with precise imitations of *film noir* classics. Elīna Gulbe's review describes the effect as follows:

The reality depicted on screen is broken up and, alongside the actors, flows into the theatre hall, assuming the shape of the memories or dreams of the main protagonist, Mark. At other times, the video materials enlarge the space by revealing the places where the protagonists are heading to when they disappear from the audience's sight. In this way, without having to resort to unnecessary re-arrangement of the stage, the audience can experience a police station, a garden by the house of the main protagonists, a beach, a bar, etc. The actors move freely between both spaces – the one that is real and the one virtually created by the video – playing games with the temporal sequence of the actions within the play.⁹

Kirby views digitalisation as a provocative step towards solipsistic subjectivity, similar to autism. He is concerned about the spread of superficiality as well as the loss of the sense of space and the perspective of thought in the arts, writing that "This puerile primitivism of the script stands in stark contrast to the sophistication of contemporary cinema's technical effects."¹⁰ On the contrary, the "priests" of the digital age, such as Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen of *Google*, are ecstatic: "Communication technologies represent opportunities for cultural breakthroughs as well as technical ones. [...] Our propensity for selective memory allows us to adapt new habits quickly and forget the ways we did things before."¹¹ Schmidt and Cohen insist that digitalisation will change identities, citizenship, nations, uprisings, conflicts and the restoration of the world after various conflicts and collisions. Such subject matter is trending in the theatres as well. The digital age is thriving. And the theatre is trying to figure out if this age will usher in an extreme subjectivity and primitivism of the message, or whether it will merely be a case of the arts acquiring broader spaces and new means of expression.

9 Gulbe, E., *Laikmeta starptelpa*. <https://www.satori.lv/index.php/article/laikmeta-starptelpa/>

10 Kirby, A., *Technology and Consumer Fanaticism Killed Postmodernism*. <https://www.wild-rutopia.com/landscape/urban-art/alan-kirby-technology-and-consumer-fanaticism-killed-postmodernism/>

11 Schmidt, E., Cohen, J. *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business*. https://books.google.lv/books/about/The_New_Digital_Age.html?id=OgK0dbE_gUC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

Fragmentation of Narrative and Space

In contrast to Lithuania, which has a long-standing theatre tradition that emphasises form, Latvian theatre is solidly rooted in the psychological approach. This tradition might be the reason why Latvian theatres utilise digital technologies predominantly as an auxiliary or experimental technique rather than as a strategy of narrative creation (as it is, for example, in the work of Lithuanian director Artūras Areima or German director Susanne Kennedy). There are currently no theatre productions in Latvia in which the scenography relies solely on projection mapping. Nonetheless, the new generation of directors is experimenting with such technologies, and the technical level of the video arts in Latvia is sufficiently sophisticated. The principles of the language of the new media, mainly expressed as an emphasis on visualisation and fragmentation,¹² are present in the theatre productions of such new directors as Inga Tropa, Valters Siliš, Elmārs Senkovs, Laura Groza-Ķibere and others. Likewise, the work of dramatists Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce and Artūrs Dīcis exhibits Kirby's concept of *new textuality*. Their work frequently contains collages of various texts, parallel narratives that end abruptly without any resolution, the combination (or even replacement) of the spoken word with closed captions, visualised text messages, emojis and

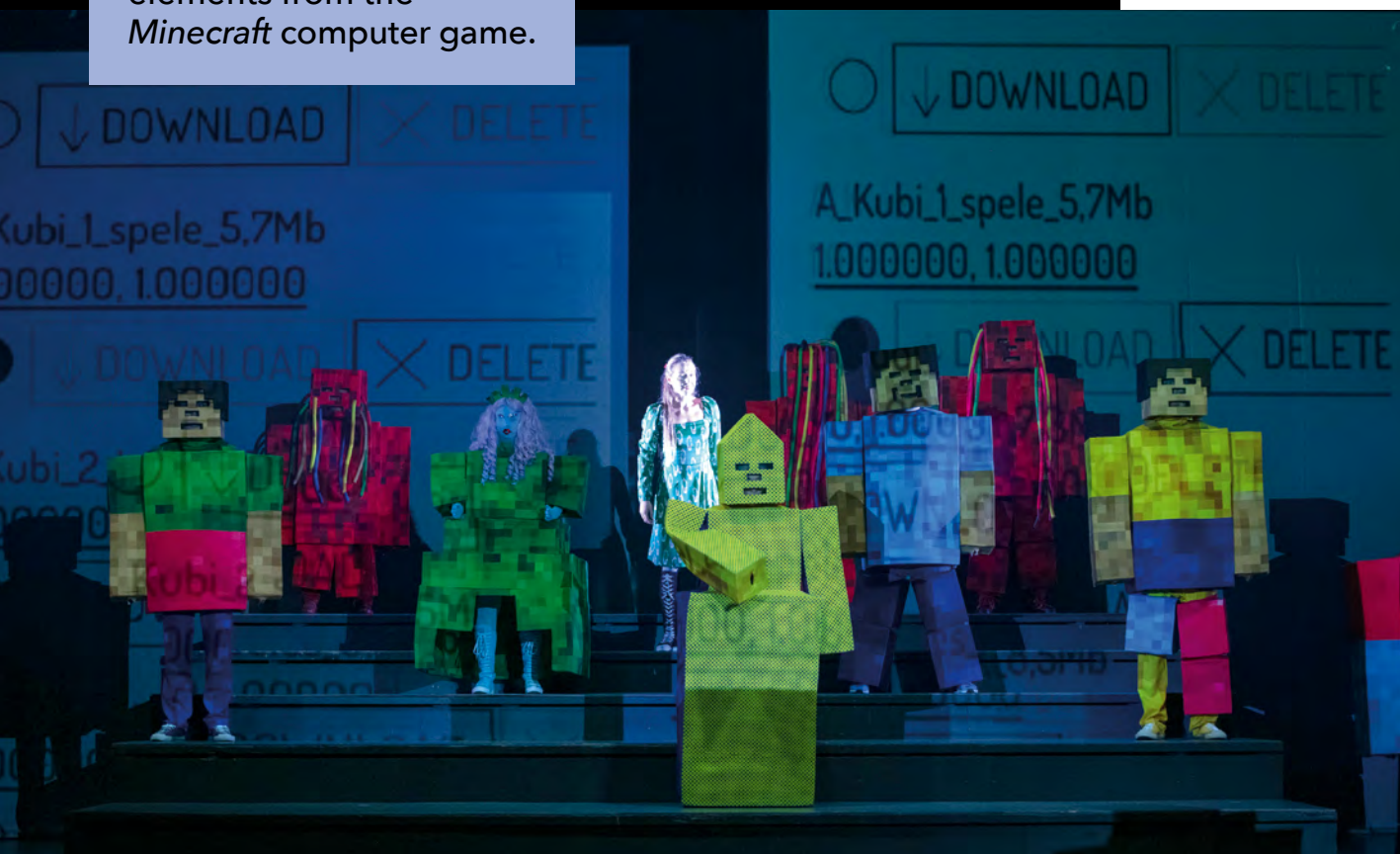
so forth. One of the characteristics of the digital age is visualised drama that seeks to "translate" the spoken word into the visual effect of scenography. In Latvia, this type of visualised drama is represented by scenographers Krista Dzudzilo and Reinis Dzudzilo.

Inga Tropa should perhaps be distinguished as the theatre director who has most decisively chosen a style that closely aligns with the principles of digimodernism. She studied at a business school but also holds a master's degree in theatre directing and has significant experience both as an actor as well as a theatre director. In her productions, Tropa frequently uses cameras to achieve at least three distinct purposes: to expand the space-time, to show close-up angles of the actor's faces, and to reveal the conditions of creating an illusion (or to achieve the so-called estrangement effect). In 2017, audiences as well as theatre critics were fascinated by Tropa's production of *Flea Market of Souls* (*Dvēseļu utenis*, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2017). Līga Ulberte's review accurately formulated the play's connection with the principles of digimodernism: "First, out of the row of six separate refrigerators and TVs comes the sound of the voices of invisible speakers. Then the speakers' mouths, eyes and faces appear. And, finally, six young people tumble out of six separate shelves. The sense of a divided, fragmented world is further intensified by the manner of the actors' communication. They keep talking to

12 See Manovich, L., *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

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The artistic team employed various digital reality techniques, including elements from the *Minecraft* computer game.



Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
(Alise Brīnumzemē)
Latvian National Theatre

Photo: Kristaps Kalns

one another, one over another, mixing languages and dialects, interspersing speech with song fragments..."¹³ The scenography of the play was created by Pamela Butāne in collaboration with video artist Austra Hauks. The

stage was equipped with a video camera that broadcast in real time the background actions taking place inside the six refrigerators - the symbolic representations of the protagonists' rented rooms in a communal flat. This approach accurately depicts the estrangement and simultaneous exhibitionism of the digital age.

Another production, *Lightning Thoughts: Irbīte* (Zibeņu domas: Irbīte, supported by the Culture Capital Foundation of Latvia, 2018), uses technology to address the relationship between

the conscious mind and the unconsciousness. The play is dedicated to a real person, the legendary Voldemārs Irbe, nicknamed Irbīte, who lived in

the first half of the 20th century. He was an artist, a writer of aphorisms and an overall unordinary personality. The title of the play is borrowed from Irbe's essay *The Unconsciousness*, in which he wrote that "unconsciousness is an unexamined thought of lightning."¹⁴ Although the play is a solo performance by actor Juris Bartkevičs, he is constantly shadowed by camera-woman Elīna Matvejeva. Parallel to the space of the physical action, there is a correspondingly large screen displaying projections from a live camera. The designer of the space, Ūna Laukmane, intended the show to happen simultaneously as a live performance and as the video on the screen, in this way highlighting not only the polarity between the conscious and unconscious, but also juxtaposing the actor's raw performance against the visual technologies. The minute details of Irbīte's character that Bartkevičs masterfully presents throughout the play are transformed into art photos and video scenes on the screen, revealing expressive close-up shots and bodily postures. When the actor's work is combined with the projections, it acquires an additional symbolic layer. The play starts and ends with the depiction of the artist's death, when he was shot by a stray bullet during the Second World War. In the finale, the camera shows on the screen the mirror image of Irbīte's collapsed body, as if lifting him up and reproducing his spirit, rather than his flesh.

¹³ Ulberte, L., *Izrādes "Dvēseļu utenis" recenzija. Komunālais karnevāls*. https://www.diena.lv/raksts/kd/recenzijas/izrades-_dveselu-utenis_-recenzija.-komunalais-karnevals-14185266

¹⁴ Irbe, V., *Atziņu druskas. Voldemārs Irbe*, ed. Guntars Pupa (Rīga: Preses nams, 1995).

In contrast to the aforementioned philosophically saturated story about an artist's life, theatre critic Ulberte aptly named Tropa's theatre play for children (based on Lewis Carroll's fantasy *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a production at the Latvian National Theatre, 2019) as a "digitalised Carroll ... playing on the multi-media swings". The artistic team, comprised of scenographer Gints Gabrāns, lighting designer Oskars Pauliņš and video artists Gustavs Voldemārs Lociks and Toms Zeļģis, employed various digital reality techniques, including elements from the *Minecraft* computer game. According to Ulberte:

Latvian theatre had long deserved the awaited return of Gints Gabrāns from SAN, the augmented reality app he created, to his first profession – scenography, or theatre as a multidimensional space. [...] The virtual objects of SAN, which can be "caught" by using the smartphone app before the theatre show and during the intermissions, include mirror images and projections of various sizes and angles as well as clouds and bolts of laser beams and multi-coloured lights that literally draw the stage and auditorium together by means of an illusory stage curtain – all this is but a primitive attempt to ver-

bally describe a part of the visual space of the show at the National Theatre.¹⁵

The performance of the actors is exaggerated in both its physical and verbal aspects. The IT specialist Leo Seļāvo perceives in this style the influence of so-called YouTubers, who are a significant part of pop culture, and believes that "this exaggeration helps to capture one's attention".¹⁶ However, psychotherapy expert Aelita Vagale has pointed out the primitive character of the narrative, which she believes stems from impulsivity: "Too liberal – you can do whatever you want."¹⁷

In 2020, Tropa directed a theatre production at the New Riga Theatre based on the folk-legend *The Bride of the Grass Snake* (*Zalkša līgava*). The play was written in 1928 by the classic Latvian author and poet Aspazija. This large-scale multi-media production consciously utilises digital technologies to construct the narrative and is characterised by an overload of audio-visual effects and typifying of the characters. The form of the show resembles a shattered mirror in which each shard reflects one and the same story from different viewpoints and in different light. According to the vision of scenographer Miķelis Fišers, the action takes place in multiple symbolic environments, breaking up the space into three different sections. First, a

screen above the stage displays reality as perceived in the eyes of the characters in the play. Two operators manage live cameras and project the live images onto the screen. The intention is to show the relativity of reality and to blur the boundaries of space and time. Second, a part of the stage

is a traditional space for the physical action with plywood decorations depicting the inside or outside of a farmhouse. The house is situated on an old railway as if it were a train car, implying that this world is both physically and morally outdated. An essential component of the play's sound environment is a squeaking, rattling noise that accompanies the change of every *mise-en-scène* inside the plywood house on the rails. At the back of the stage is a surreal and fascinatingly beautiful lake surrounded by a sky-blue bank of fog and ornamental silhouettes of trees painted in fluorescent colours. The shapes of the trees resemble snake heads, fish tails, tridents and cauldrons with fish tails hanging over the rims. As pointed out in the play, this lake is a portal to an augmented reality that only the main protagonist, Ziednese (played by Marija Linarte), can enter. In the words of the scenographer, Ziednese "is suffocating in the banal routine of daily

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The reaction from audiences confirms that the “digital generation” accepts the fragmented narratives constructed with the help of technology and is excited by the experience of conspicuous visualisation.

life”. Sometimes all three spaces are inhabited simultaneously, while at other times the technical elements (such as lights or cameras) help concentrate the action within one single space. The final element of the stage is a large-scale cinema screen that blocks the entire stage during the scenes when the

action takes place in the underwater world of the Grass Snake. The theatre becomes a cinema that shows the ideal world of Ziednese and the Grass Snake (played by Vilis Daudziņš) – life in a sunbathed, bright green woodland on the banks of a rushing river, where both protagonists play with their children. In Baltic folklore, the image of the grass snake is rooted in the cult of the dead. The grass snake is regarded as a gateway between the two worlds, as the symbol of the soul, and is characterised by ambivalence. The grass snake reigns over the dead, yet it also guarantees the continuation of life. Such an interpretation can be found in the original text by Aspazija as well. The play, however, does not depict the mythological layer. Instead, there is only an ideal family: a loving husband (the Grass Snake), a mother (Ziednese) and their two children. Although one of the children has Down syndrome, the family is truly happy. The message on the big screen is

15 Ulberte, L., *Super Mario lotosa ziedā. Izrādes "Alise Brīnumzemē" recenzija*. <https://www.diena.lv/raksts/kd/teatris/super-mario-lotosa-zieda-izrades-alise-brinumzeme-recenzija-14229017>

16 Jonīte, D., *Alises Brīnumzeme digitālajā laikmetā*, Teātra Vēstnesis IV (2019), 24.

17 Ibid., 25.

clear – such a beautiful life can exist only in an unreal world. According to the director's explanation in the annotation to the play, earthly life is depicted as the realm of the dead and is visualised through the bouquets of black flowers as well as the dark clothing of the actors, as if they have been soaked in mud. Despite its overall esoteric mood and the multi-media blurring of the space-time, the play itself should be regarded as social critique. The reaction from audiences confirms that the "digital generation" accepts the fragmented narratives constructed with the help of technology and is excited by the experience of conspicuous visualisation.

One of the most unique, daring and technically complicated productions in the creative biography of director **Laura Groza-Ķibere** is her interpretation of the play *Roberto Succo* by Bernard-Marie Koltès (Liepāja Theatre, 2019). The genre of the play may be described as "various experiences". As pointed out in the annotation, the play is based on real-life events and is a story about the Italian serial killer Roberto Succo (1960–1988). The playwright ironically reflects upon the relationship between a mentally ill criminal and society and makes the audience wonder whether the entire human race is predestined to violence and harbours an unconscious tendency towards murder. This theatrical production merges the text by Koltès with the personality of avant-garde artist Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), who was one of the most noticeable conceptualists of the 1960s and 70s, producing various happenings, per-

formances and installations. The cover of the playbill features an image of Succo (played by Egons Dombrovskis) that intentionally bears a striking resemblance to Beuys (costume designer Jolanta Rimkutė). The play is a loosely strung-together list of motifs in Beuys' creative work. The drama itself is left to serve as a source of inspiration for presenting situations that are resolved as pure performance. The scenography by Mārtiņš Vilkārsis unmistakably uses visuality as the carrier of meaning by mingling Beuys' works of art with quotes from Koltès' text. The concept of dualism permeates everything on the stage. Jean Baudrillard's "implosion" is incarnated in the merging of differences, contradictions and opposites that, in turn, erode the boundaries between fact and fiction and refute the very possibility of establishing an unambiguous meaning. *Roberto Succo* is a complicated experiment and not easily accessible to the majority of audiences. Great importance is placed on Artis Dzērve's video projections depicting excerpts of Beuys' performances and documentary snapshots. Overall, the play is a conceptual refutation of narrative, or, more precisely, a composition made up of the fragments of two different narratives.

Discussion about the future

Some Latvian directors perceive digitalisation as the evolution of theatre language. Others worry that the essence of theatre might become lost.

In a playbill for the student theatre production *Fresh Blood* (*Svaigās asinis*, New Riga Theatre, 2019), director Alvis Hermanis concludes, "The new technologies of our age have turned into the next trendy object of universal adoration, the new gospel." Hermanis represents the view that "... theatre is nothing other than the exchange of living energy between the stage and the audience."¹⁸ He insists that "theatre should not be merely a place to execute the director's vision, but, first and foremost, it should display the artistry of an actor."¹⁹ Hermanis believes that the actor is always the carrier of the meaning, and the success of the entire play hinges on the actor. It should not come as a surprise, then, that Hermanis' own work argues against the new theatre and the new era, exploiting the propensity of digimodernism to controvert itself. While integrating the tools of digimodernism, such as visual expressiveness, fragmented text, rejection of a linear story and new technologies, Hermanis seeks deeper interconnections and philosophical generalisations. His play *White Helicopter* (*Baltais helikopters*, New Riga Theatre, 2019) talks about the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI (Mikhail Baryshnikov as the Pope, Kaspars Znotiņš as the Secretary, Guna Zariņa as Sister Tabiana). The play ran almost simultaneously with the broadcasting of Fernando

Meirelles' movie *The Two Popes* on Netflix, and both productions bear many similarities. The play seeks to create a feeling of cinematographic authenticity, and its text runs as a dialogue comprised of multilingual phrases loaded with metaphor and key words and expressed at various tempos and rhythms. Nonetheless, based on form and content, Hermanis' play can still be categorised as a classic theatre production. According to theatre critic Kitija Balcere, the authentic stage setting serves as a ploy to draw the viewer into the space and frame of Joseph Ratzinger's mind.²⁰ Yet there are items in this environment that clearly don't belong here, that have been placed here by the new world. For example, an exercise bike that Baryshnikov's pope gets on, peddles a bit and climbs off, out of breath. This equipment restricts bodily movement, and it is too swift, too mechanical, too primitive for the Pope. In contrast, the audience is treated to a dance by the Pope under a single beam of light. The gestures in the dance are delicate and expressive, the movement is fluid. Such a contrast clearly justifies the desire to invite the world-renowned ballet dancer to play the role of Ratzinger and prioritises the suggestive nature of personality. Likewise, there is a significance attached to the metaphor of the helicopter. At the beginning of the play,

18 Hermanis, A., *Dienasgrāmata* (Neputns, 2016), 82.

19 Ibid., 32.

20 Balcere, K., *Piezīmes par JRT izrādi "Baltais helikopters"*. *Atlūgums*. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/kultura/teatris-un-deja/piezimes-par-jrt-izradi-baltais-helikopters-atlugums.a339944/>

a stray drone accidentally flies into the room. In the finale, the roaring noise of a real helicopter drowns out all other sounds.

Directors Gatis Šmits, Vladislavs Naštavševs and Indra Roga are among the other staunch advocates of "live communication" in the theatre. And, although the young directors Klāvs Mellis, Paula Pļavniece and actress-turned-director Kristīne Krūze tend to employ modern technologies very organically, their plays also always put the actor at the centre of the production.

When discussing the impact of technologies on the future, one should also mention the productions that formally correspond to the principles of digimodernism, yet conceptually take a stand against the side effects that such technologies create, such as the incapacity to examine reality objectively, shallow thinking, portrayal

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of the sordid as the elite, and regarding anxiety and fanaticism as typical mental states. This approach is represented by director Dmitrijs Petrenko in his play *The Century of Indifference* (*Vienaldzības gadsimts*, Liepāja Theatre, 2020). The production based on an idea by Aleksandr Molochnikov

(with text by Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce and stage and costume design by Krista and Reinis Dzudzilo) tells about an imaginary situation in which Latvia is placed under curfew after a terrorist attack. In this context, a group of former classmates decides to conduct their class reunion through a video chat. The scenography displays fragments of five separate spaces, as if viewed from a computer or smartphone camera. The protagonists are named according to their Internet aliases, such as @KARITONS and @!!sexy_ibrahim!!. Each of them is cast as a stereotypical user of their particular social media domain. The playbill is written in slang and anglicised Latvian vocabulary that is commonly used in Internet communications. The chat members commence a game of "truth or dare". Unbeknown to the group, an unknown user, possibly an artificial intellect, joins the chat room. In the

second act, the classmates suddenly find themselves in a single physical space – a sort of "black hole". Their clothes are dirty and torn, and they appear traumatised, as if having survived an explosion.

The "black hole" – a projection on the large cinema screen – is made to look like a computer screen or some sort of portal draped in black. The screen displays various close-up shots of the actors' faces. The action seemingly takes place in the minds of the heads that are displayed on the screen. Whatever was formerly said

on the Internet now comes back to bite the one who said it. This is a continuation of the former game, however, the game is now controlled by a mechanical voice coming from somewhere behind the scene. The conclusion of the play remains open-ended, having raised the question of whether we can perceive the differences between the physical and virtual worlds,

or whether we have instead lost ourselves in the process.

In the present age, theatre can develop in various diverse ways, and technologies are expanding this diversity even further. However, one should be cautious about a supremacy of form without any underlying meaning, which risks robbing the theatrical narrative of its multi-layered nature.

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Newcomers in Latvian Theatre Directing: the New Generation and Forms of Theatre-Making

Since 2010, Latvian theatre has experienced significant changes related not only to the natural emergence of a new generation but also to some consequential transformations in the overall theatre-making process. The term “newcomers” is here associated with young directors, actors, stage designers, choreographers and others starting their stage careers at the dawn of the second decade of the 21st century. However, more and more new theatre groups have also been established in Latvia in recent years, thus expanding the traditional boundaries of the theatre-making process.

A very short prehistory

The year 2010 can be marked as a significant milestone in recent Latvian theatre history. This was the time

when the so-called “new wave” of young theatre directors took the floor in Latvian theatre. Most visible members of the “new wave” – Vladislavs Nastavševs (b. 1978), Elmārs Seņkovs (b. 1984), Valters Sīlis (b. 1985), Vies-turs Meikšāns (b. 1980), Dmitrijs Pet-renko (b. 1981), Laura Groza-Ķibere (b. 1985) – have left a notable footprint in contemporary Latvian theatre. Each of them has developed an individual creative path, concentrating on specific themes or aesthetics; however, most of them (excluding Sīlis, who works mainly with the Latvian National Theatre) have staged performances at various state theatres and sought to explore the means of expression of both psychological and postdramatic theatre. Latvian theatre researchers have already stressed that this generation of Latvian theatre directors differs from their predecessors not only in their particular theatre language (i.e., moving away from the traditional

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Jubilee '98, based on the script of the movie *Festen* by Danish film director Thomas Vinterberg, was an ironic and witty recreation of the time.



Jubilee '98 (Jubileja '98)
Daugavpils Theatre

Photo: Džeina Saulīte

means of expression of psychological or text-based theatre) but also in their perception of (national) history, values, etc.¹ This first post-Soviet generation (born in the 1980s) of Latvian theatre directors has no internal need to break artistic boundaries by using the tools of postmodernist theatre and therefore opts to explore *verbatim* theatre, visual dramaturgy, physical theatre and other artistic approaches.

The next generation of stage directors (born in the mid-1990s) has already emerged on the horizon. Unlike the new-wave theatre directors (Nastavševs, Seņkovs and Sīlis to name a few) who appeared as a group of peers eventually developing their careers in individual artistic directions, the next wave of newcomers, in contrast, entered Latvian theatre one by one. Moreover, after the “explosion” of creativity generated by such new-wave members as Nastavševs, Seņkovs and Sīlis, who found themselves at the top of the nominees’ lists for the Performers’ Night already shortly after their debuts, audiences and critics mainly focused on the development of the new-wave directors’ careers, leaving little space for new theatre makers. Already around 2012 a few notable post-new-wave theatre directors, such as Paula Pļavniece (b. 1989), Viesturs Roziņš (b. 1990) and Inga Tropa (b. 1985), appeared on the map of Latvian theatre, followed by such recent newcomers as Klāvs Mellis (b. 1989), Toms Treinis (b. 1994)

and others. After a few years of hard creative work, each of these newcomers had already been nominated for the Performers’ Night awards. Furthermore, since 2017 the Performers’ Night award for best small-scale production has gone to productions by these youngest theatre directors, namely, *Jubilee ’98* (*Jubileja ’98*, Daugavpils Theatre, 2017, dir. by Paula Pļavniece), *Flea Market of Souls* (*Dvēseļu utenis*, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2018, dir. by Inga Tropa) and *The Screamers* (*Klīdzēji*, Daugavpils Theatre, 2019, dir. by Viesturs Roziņš). This demonstrates the growing importance of the young and youngest generations of theatre artists in Latvian theatre.

Another significant aspect to emphasise is the organisational context of the entrance of newcomers into the arena of Latvian theatre. While around 2010 the new-wave stage directors debuted in independent theatre platforms such as the Dirty Deal Teatro and Ģertrūdes Street Theatre, the large state theatres now opened their doors to newcomers by giving them the opportunity to stage performances in their small halls, thus facing lower financial risks in comparison to the large halls. Accordingly, the Daugavpils Theatre, led by artistic manager Oļegs Šapošņikovs, has served as a launch pad for young theatre directors such as Georgijs Surkovs (b. 1990), the aforementioned Pļavniece and others. The Daile Theatre has produced several titles in its experimental stage

production cycle *Free Stage* (*Brīvā skatuve*). The Latvian National Theatre has included in its repertoire such graduation works as *The Blue* (*Zilā*, 2017) directed by Toms Treinis and *This Beautiful Future* (*Šī skaistā nākotne*, 2019) staged by Diāna Kaijaka (b. 1992).

Likewise, such annual national and international theatre festivals as Homo Novus (organised by the New Theatre Institute of Latvia), the Valmiera Summer Theatre Festival (initiated by stage designer and director Reinis Suhanovs) and the traditional *Autumn of the Patriarch* student theatre festival of the Latvian Academy of Culture have provided various opportunities to accumulate and exchange creative ideas.

Newcomers in stage directing: A few names to remember

As mentioned previously, the youngest generation of Latvian theatre directors had to prove their talent through hard work and by adapting to the constantly changing conditions, all the while trying to meet the requirements of contemporary performing arts.

Paula Pļavniece started her career at

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The youngest generation of Latvian theatre directors had to prove their talent through hard work and by adapting to the constantly changing conditions.

the independent theatre Dirty Deal Teatro by staging children’s performances, including *In the Shadow of Death* (*Nāves ēnā*, 2014) and *Clouds* (*Mākoņi*, 2014). This led to experimenting with various theatre forms and means of expression, which she later adapted

to productions for adult audiences. Some of her most noticeable productions – the aforementioned *Jubilee ’98* at the Daugavpils Theatre and *Club “Paradise”* (*Klubs “Paradīze”*, 2018) at the Dirty Deal Teatro – were created in close collaboration with the young playwright Justīne Kļava (b. 1990). In both of these productions, Pļavniece and Kļava investigated the rather recent past – the 1990s as a time of social and economic change. Moreover, by using both nostalgia and self-deprecating humour, the team offered a rather unique point of view by looking to the past through the eyes of the post-Soviet generation and therefore trying to understand the dramatic consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union. *Jubilee ’98*, based on the script of the movie *Festen* by Danish film director Thomas Vinterberg, was an ironic and witty recreation of the time when exotic fruit and fancy clothes of foreign origin were a sign of prestige, etc. However, the performance didn’t stop at recreating the everyday reality of 1998; instead, it

1 See, for example, the recent study about Latvian theatre: *Latvijas jaunā režija*, 2015 (ed. by S. Radzobe).

grew into a tragicomic story about a family trying to cope with changes in society, in the economy and, accordingly, in the global perception of a world no longer divided by the Iron Curtain.

This interest in the post-Soviet traumas and stereotypes that still haunt Latvian society today (such as the perception of Russians as the enemies of Latvians, or of the Germans as the initiators of every evil in the world)² was the focus of *Flea Market of Souls* (2018), created by playwright Justīne Kļava and director Inga Tropa. Staged at the Dirty Deal Teatro, the performance took audiences to a shared flat in the centre of Riga occupied by a “colourful” group of young people. At the beginning, the conversations between the inhabitants of the flat were shown in a video projection of a *WhatsApp* chat group and resembled the politically incorrect comments that follow the articles on almost every news website. Difficulties in communication were illustrated not only by the absurdly witty dialogues but also by the spatial conception. To highlight the diverse personalities and lifestyles of the residents of the shared flat, as well as their harsh coexistence, the young stage designer Pamela Butāne put six refrigerators on the stage and had each of the residents inhabit one of them both symbolically and physically.

Flea Market of Souls was the big breakthrough for the young stage director **Inga Tropa**. Tropa earned her bachelor’s degree in theatre directing at the Latvian Academy of Culture already in 2005, however, up until 2012, when she finished the master’s study programme, she was mostly known as an actress with the New Riga Theatre troupe. Since then, Tropa has produced two large-scale productions. Both *Alice in Wonderland* (*Alise Brīnumzemē*, based on Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Latvian National Theatre, 2019) and *Bride of the Grass Snake* (based on a play with a similar title by Latvian playwright Aspazija (b. 1865), New Riga Theatre, 2020) manifest Tropa’s two main interests, which were already present in her previous stage works, namely, her interest in the mythological as well as in exploring the possibilities of modern technologies. While positioned as a performance for children and inviting audiences to re-evaluate the destructive influence of technologies such as video games on the minds of children, *Alice in Wonderland* applied a feminist approach to Carroll’s classic story and involved a broad range of technological tools. The performance received mixed reviews from critics, who mostly pointed out both a lack of focus in the selection of the target audience and an overly broad storyline. Feminism and technologies are also at the centre

of Tropa’s interpretation of Aspazija’s classic work, offering an investigation into the subconscious and the never-ending transformations of a woman.

Working both as a teacher and a stage director, **Viesturs Roziņš** has collaborated with various independent theatre platforms, including the Dirty Deal Teatro in Riga, Gods’ Theatre³ in Liepāja and theatres in Daugavpils and Valmiera. Recently, he has turned to experimenting with the aesthetics of the theatre of the senses. Created in collaboration with his wife, playwright Ludmila Roziņa, and composer Jēkabs Nīmanis, *The Screamers* (based on the novel *Snows*, (*Sniegi*) by Latvian author Jānis Klīdzējs) consisted of a dense layer of sounds and music created on stage by the actors themselves. The deliberately close-up, tight space and the dynamic stage action created the necessary atmosphere to invite the audience into the world of a blind girl named Tāsite. Roziņš offered a more provocative setting in *Pyramid* (*Piramīda*, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2019), aimed young audiences, in which the audience members were blindfolded, seated across from another blindfolded person, and together they investigated objects on the table between them as well as the hands of the other person.

In addition to creating new, original productions based on national drama, the youngest generation of Latvian theatre directors is also interested in

interpreting literary classics, including plays by William Shakespeare and Edward Albee as well as Latvian classics by Rainis, Rūdolfs Blaumanis, Gunārs Priede and others. One of the new-generation stage directors who has turned to classic texts is **Toms Treinis**, whose artistic interests most resemble those of Elmārs Seņkovs, his former teacher at the Latvian Academy of Culture. Treinis’ diploma production when graduating from the academy, *The Blue* (Latvian National Theatre, 2017), attempted to “modernise” a play by Priede, a Latvian playwright of the 1970s, by setting the action in the 21st century and thus moving away from the Soviet-era context of the play. The production offered subtle psychological acting, for example, in the portrayal of the complicated relationship between the mother (played by Daiga Gaismaņa) and her son (Kārlis Reijers or Kaspars Aniņš), and thus highlighted the universal nature of the play’s conflict. Treinis then moved to a more experimental artistic language. For example, in *The Dove* (*Dūja*, production based on comedy written by Estonian author Andri Luup, Latvian National Theatre, 2018) he explored the grotesque relationships between theatre artists behind the scenes, and in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (Daile Theatre, 2017) he played with various theatre props to tell the story of the destructive relationship of a married couple.

2 Such and similar statements can be found throughout the comments sections of popular Latvian electronic media, such as Delfi.lv, etc., and are the result of the traumas left by the Soviet occupation not only on the older generations but also on post-Soviet generations, who have heard such exaggerated opinions expressed in the family and thus adopted them.

3 Kaspars Gods, an actor with the Liepāja Theatre, founded a private theatre in Liepāja in 2011, managing small-scale productions in collaboration with other actors from the Liepāja Theatre as well as various Latvian theatre directors. The productions by Gods’ Theatre are mostly aimed at young audiences.



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More and more actors have turned away from working in large public state theatres, choosing instead the status of freelancer as well as trying their hand at stage directing or playwriting.

The Swamp Children
(*Purva bērni*)
Daile Theatre

Photo: Arturs Pavlovs

Devised theatre and blurring the boundaries between theatre professions

Following the example of Alvis Hermanis and his New Riga Theatre acting troupe (for example, their cycle of *Latvian Stories* around 2010), as well as the locally renowned tandem of stage director Valters Silis and playwright Jānis Balodis, most of the past decade's young stage directors have turned to a collective theatre-making process, creating each production with a group of like-minded colleagues. In recent Latvian theatre, the turn towards the principle of devised theatre has renewed the importance of the dramaturge. Young dramaturges Justīne Kļava, Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce, Matīss Gricmanis and others write their texts not prior to, but during the rehearsal process, expanding the functions of the playwright and emphasising the play as a work-in-process adaptable to the creative aims and needs of the production team. Moreover, Bugavičute-Pēce and Kļava have also become the dramaturges at the Liepāja Theatre and Daile Theatre, respectively. Nevertheless, this has not lessened the value of finished plays, especially during the burgeoning of creativity related to Latvia's centenary celebration in 2018.

Another equally important issue to mention in the context of newcomers is the increasing fusion of theatre professions. More and more actors have turned away from working in large public state theatres, choosing instead the status of freelancer as well

as trying their hand at stage directing or playwriting. **Artūrs Dīcis**, an actor with the Daile Theatre, has in recent years become one of the leading Latvian playwrights, with his plays, such as *Even Whales Are Afraid* (*Arī valiem ir bail*, Latvian National Theatre, 2018) and *The Swamp Children* (*Purva bērni*, Daile Theatre, 2019), being staged in the largest state theatres and winning Performers' Night awards.

Like Rēzija Kalniņa, Ināra Slucka and other well-known Latvian actors, **Intars Rešetins** (b. 1980), also of the Daile Theatre, formally ended his acting career to devote his creative energy to stage directing. So far he has intensively explored the plays of contemporary French playwright Florian Zeller, including the trilogy *The Father* (Latvian National Theatre, 2016), *The Son* (Daile Theatre, 2019) and *The Mother* (Daile Theatre, 2020), which are rooted in the aesthetics of psychological theatre and pay tribute to the personalities of the leading actors. At the same time, not only Valters Silis and Kārlis Krūmiņš, but also **Edgars Niklasons** (b. 1988) and **Klāvs Knuts Sukurs** (b. 1987) are actively working both as playwrights and stage directors, merging the functions of both professions and proving that the theatre-making process can no longer be divided into separate fields or professions.

Following the overall trend of visualisation in contemporary theatre, more and more theatre professionals have turned to the aesthetics of visual theatre, alongside stage and costume designers announcing their sovereignty from the authority of stage

directors. Reinis and Krista Dzudzilo, the husband-and-wife team of stage and costume designers, already tried their hand at the aesthetics of visual theatre, from the installation *Pathétique: On Visible Language* (*Patētiskā. Par redzamo valodu*, Homo Novus Festival, 2017) to the visual dramaturgy created for the productions *Portraits: Wolves and Sheep* (*Portreti. Vilki un avis* dir. by Viesturs Meikšāns, Liepāja Theatre, 2015) and *A Century of Indifference* (*Vienaldzības gadsimts* dir. by Dmitrijs Petrenko, Liepāja Theatre, 2020). **PERFORācija**, the tandem of young theatre artists Pamela Butāne and Beatrise Zaķe, have been producing object and visual theatre performances since 2019. In 2020, another stage designer, the internationally acclaimed artist Monika Pormale, announced a new creative alliance with stage director Viesturs Meikšāns called **Freshfreshfr**, which aims at exploring the possibilities of visual theatre and contemporary music.

Expanding freelance options

As mentioned previously, after graduating from the Latvian Academy of Culture, more and more young actors

have chosen or have been forced to seek freelance work. However, since 2018, a number of new theatre troupes have gradually appeared on the Latvian theatre scene, marking a new

“More and more young actors have chosen or have been forced to seek freelance work.”

trend in forming creative groups / troupes / ensembles that unite artists with similar creative interests and views. Klāvs Mellis, one of the rising young stage directors, pointed out in a television interview that founding a new theatre troupe allows one to not make compromises, which are inevitable in any larger theatre formation.⁴ His colleague Ance Strazda also suggested that, unlike smaller artistic groups, the two so-called independent platforms, Dirty Deal Teatro and Ģertrūdes Street Theatre, have shifted their status to production companies, taking on board various theatre artists and more or less subjecting their artistic creations to the overall programme of the theatre.⁵

Graduated by the Latvian Academy of Culture in 2015, Mellis, Reinis Boters, Āris Matesovičs and Strazda began working on various projects, until in 2017 they founded the **KVADRIFRONS** theatre troupe. Man-

aging not only the creative but also the administrative process of this newly founded theatre,⁶ KVADRIFRONS has set an example for young actors. In its first years, under the roof of the Riga Circus, KVADRIFRONS explored different forms of performing – excursion *Touched by a Miracle* (*Brīnuma skartie*, 2018), children's production *The Perturbon* (*Perturbons*, dir. by Paula Pļavniece, 2019) and youth productions *Spring* (*Pavasaris*, dir. by Alicia Geugelin (Germany), 2019), story-telling and documentary theatre *LV vs. RU*, (dir. by Reinis Boters, 2019), *Fake News*, (dir. by Klāvs Mellis, 2019). Besides, they also collaborated with other cultural institutions, such as the Valmiera Summer Theatre Festival and the Latvian National Theatre (co-production of *Pride and Prejudice* (*Lepnums un aizspriedumi*, based on the novel by Jane Austen, dir. by Klāvs Mellis, 2020).

Elmārs Senkovs, one of the most active contemporary Latvian stage directors, became the creative leader of **ESARTE**,⁷ a company created by the so-called “puppetry course” that graduated from the Latvian Academy

of Culture in 2019 and who chose or were forced to part ways with the Latvian Puppet Theatre.⁸ Specialising in the aesthetics of object theatre, the new company has so far premiered their first productions – *The Last Hours* (*Pēdējās stundas*, 2020) at the Dirty Deal Teatro, as well as an open-space production *aSapniensi* (2020) during the Valmiera Summer festival, and is planning to explore a variety of venues according to the concept of each new production. The main focus of ESARTE is the actor's body and the variety of forms and techniques reached through movement and plastics. Former actors of the New Riga Theatre who were dismissed by Alvis Hermanis in 2017⁹ have formed a new company called **Willa Theatre**,¹⁰ based at the C. C. von Stritzky villa, which has previously housed various cultural projects. It has become the home for different interdisciplinary projects – poetic theatre (*Putn ilgs*, after the works of the Finnish poet Heli Laaksonen, 2020), monoopera (the soloperformance of Dita Lūriņa in the opera by Kaspars Rolšteins *#Ditoo*, 2020), etc. At the beginning of

4 <https://ltv.lsm.lv/lv/raksts/10.03.2020-mazo-teatru-prieksrocibas-un-trukumi-runa-kvadri-frons.id182123/>

5 Ibid.

6 Both Mellis and Boters also work as stage directors, and all four members of the company simultaneously act in productions by Kvadrifrons as well as in other projects.

7 <https://www.diena.lv/raksts/kd/teatris/jauna-teatra-apvieniba-esarte-elmara-senkova-vadiba-sak-ar-tuvosanos-vecumam-14234054>

8 The Latvian Academy of Culture offered a programme for young actors specifically in the field of puppet and object theatre, with the aim that the students could join the troupe of the Latvian Puppet Theatre after graduation.

9 In 2017, after the theatre's change of residency from the historic building on Lāčplēša iela to the Tobacco Factory, director Alvis Hermanis announced his decision let go six actors of the New Riga Theatre troupe, justifying this step as the start of a new phase in the creative work of the theatre.

10 <https://www.kroders.lv/highlight/4351>

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The deliberately close-up, tight space and the dynamic stage action created the necessary atmosphere to invite the audience into the world of a blind girl.

The Screamers (Klīdzēji)
Daugavpils Theatre

Photo: Džeina Saulīte



2020, a group of students in the so-called “Liepāja actors’ course”, who are currently studying at the Latvian Academy of Culture with the intention of joining the Liepāja Theatre, have also formed a new artistic formation, called **Mikropole**, together with students from the writing studies and culture management programmes at Liepāja University and new media artists.¹¹

The active formation of new theatre troupes has also influenced the work of large stage theatres, especially during the *Covid-19* crisis. The need to seek new forms of expression during the *Covid* lockdown, exploration of digital technologies and other factors have changed the stable course of repertoire theatres.

New forms, new opportunities

Emerging new theatre companies, the merging of different theatre professions and the constant search for financial support for creative ideas has changed the overall landscape of contemporary Latvian theatre. The balance of power is no longer dominated by theatre as a building (meaning traditional state-repertoire theatres), making the theatre process more exiting and unpredictable than ever before. The period between 2010 and 2020 altered the aesthetics and organisational principles of Latvian theatre, but only time will tell what long-lasting values this period has given us.

¹¹ <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/kultura/teatris-un-deja/liepaja-sevi-pieteikusi-jauna-radosa-apvieniba-mikropole.a346762/>

LĪGA ULBERTE

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Methods of Text Production in Latvian Contemporary Theatre

Over the past decade, even in Latvia, the understanding of the playwright's role has increasingly changed. A playwright is no longer perceived as a writer sitting at a desk and writing plays. Instead, the playwright or dramatist is a theatre maker who is present at the rehearsal hall or even on stage. Two main factors have fostered his process: the current education system for playwrights and the development of professional theatre.

As a turning point in the relationship between the dramaturgy / text and production / staging, the historiography of the 20th century theatre refers to a frequently quoted expression by the French structuralist Roland Barthes (1915-1980): "*Qu'est-ce que la théâtralité? C'est le théâtre moins le texte.*" (What is theatricality? It is the-

atre minus the text.)¹ The watershed in the development of Latvian dramaturgy, in turn, can be pinpointed to the year 2001, when the bachelor's programme of the Department of Theatre, Cinema and Television at the Latvian Academy of Culture graduated its first class of dramatists. Although this study programme has now been closed (the last class graduated in 2015), its graduates have conceptually shaped the landscape of Latvian contemporary dramaturgy. Inga Ābele (b. 1972), Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce (b. 1988), Jānis Balodis (b. 1987), Justīne Kļava (b. 1990) and Matīss Gricmanis (b. 1991) are currently among the most influential authors, although by no means the only ones, who studied under playwright and theatre director Lauris Gundars (b. 1958) and imbibed his definition

¹ Barthes, R., *Le théâtre de Baudelaire*, Essais critiques (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964), 41-47.



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The playwright or dramatist is a theatre maker who is present at the rehearsal hall or even on stage. Matīss Gricmanis (in the picture) is both the author of the autobiographic play and performer.

*To be a Nationalist
(Būt nacionālistam)*
Dirty Deal Teatro

Photo: Aivars Ivbulis

of drama as the action of theatre and cinema, rather than a genre of written literature.

Gundars defends this perception in more detail in his book *Dramatica, or Rational Poetry* (2009)², which is based on his personal experience as a playwright and educator. Since 1987, when the director and theoretician Pēteris Pētersons (1923–1998) wrote his analytical reflection *Drama as the Criteria*, Gundars' book has been the only original work in Latvian dedicated to the technique and theory of drama. In it, he dedicates an entire chapter to the relationship between dramaturgy and literature. Here he defines the most significant factors opposing the notion that a play is merely a genre of literature:

Unlike the poetry or prose, the text of a play is not the final product; it is designed for further interpretation. "The direct recipient at whom the text of the play is aimed is the director, the producer, the actor or even the omniscient cloakroom attendant. It is only after making its way through the wall of these *intermediary recipients* (original italic – ed. note) of various calibres that the work of a playwright reaches its *end user* (original italic – ed. note) – the spectator. Consequently, the end product of the playwrighting is a completely different matter: a theatre production."³

Dramaturgy is primarily a *technical* style of writing. One can learn to do it if one masters certain tricks of the trade. "Any base for a dramatic text-based work intended for public performing is significantly more like a refrigerator manual than a novel. [...] Clearly, the more straightforward the instructions, the greater the odds that the refrigerator will be functioning even in the home of the technically unsavvy consumer – and functioning exactly as intended by the constructor at that. [...] Dramatic material is a technical instruction that lays out the way to reach the soul of the end addressee – the viewer / listener."⁴

Although one could criticise this theoretical proposition of Gundars' (for example, when judging the quality of dramaturgy, it excludes categories such as subtext and the use of language as more than merely a means of expression), one must nonetheless concede that it vastly increases the interpretative boundaries of the concept of dramaturgy. It is a text written for the needs of theatre (or cinema, or television), rather than a specific literary genre, and it includes such intermediary genres as librettos, screen adaptations and movie scripts – the type of genres formerly scarcely addressed in Latvian theatre and literature studies.

2 The new edition of this book was reprinted in 2015 (in Latvian), in 2017 (English translation) and in 2020 (Russian translation).

3 Gundars, L., *Dramatica or Rational Poetics* (transl. Sabīne Ozola), (Rīga: Darbnīcas, 2016), 18.

4 Ibid., 20.

However, the theory and practice of postdramatic theatre has rendered the role of the text in theatres an in-essential, and yet very topical, issue. The concept of theatrical text (and by this one must understand not only the linguistic reality of a written or spoken text but also the totality and interaction of signs utilised in the show) has enlarged the understanding of this phenomenon. As has been pointed out by Hans Thies Lehmann, who conceptually defined this phenomenon, in postdramatic theatre the playwright's material is exchanged with the text of theatrical production (which is the case even when a text is spoken on stage). The linguistic text becomes merely one of the components of the performance, alongside gestures, music, visual images and other elements. Instead of the spoken word, the structure of the performance is formed by another type of dramaturgy – a narrative of the production that is based on audio-visual information that is not subject to the conceptual meaning of the text and can develop on its own terms.⁵ As text loses its dominant role, while retaining a particular place in the structure of a play, it is only inevitable that the function of the playwright in the creation of theatre productions is changing as well.

As an essential turning point in the creation of dramatic material in Latvia one can note the so-called collaborative creation method practised by director Alvis Hermanis and the actors

at the New Riga Theatre. It began with the play *Long Life* (*Garā dzīve*, 2003) and has continued in a succession of productions dedicated to "Latvian subject matter" (*Latvian Stories* (*Latviešu stāsti*, 2004), *Latvian Love* (*Latviešu mīlestība*, 2006), *Martha from Blue Hill* (*Zilākalna Marta*, 2009) and *The Grandfather* (*Vectēvs*, 2009), *Black Milk* (*Melnais piens*, 2010) and, recently, *History Research Commission* (*Vēstures izpētes komisija*, 2019). At the beginning of the 21st century, this approach ushered in a completely new method of producing plays in Latvian theatres and, in a way, marginalised the role of the playwright. By now, in 2020, the creation of text within the process of the production itself has already become a widespread practice in Latvian theatres. The entire team collaborates on the text by focusing on a given documentary or fictitious theme. Directors such as Vladislavs Nastavševs, Andrejs Jarojojs, Mārtiņš Eihe, Krista Burāne, Valters Sīlis and Elmārs Seņkovs, as well as the non-governmental theatre company KVADRIFRONS founded in 2017, have utilised this method in several of their productions. Some directors have themselves authored texts for their own productions, for example, Hermanis, Sīlis, Andris Kalnozols, Ģirts Šolis and Kārlis Krūmiņš.

However, those theatre texts that have been created with the help of a playwright (either during or prior to rehearsals for the production) still represent the quantitative majority in

5 Lehmann, H. T., *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 2008).

Latvian theatres. Therefore, the following analysis is dedicated to three of the most prominent methods of text production that feature the creative collaboration of a dramatist and have resulted in qualitative text able to stand on its own merits.

The use of documentary investigation in the creation of the stage script

Dramatist **Jānis Balodis** and director **Valters Sīlis** could be regarded as the founders of contemporary documentary theatre in Latvia. Their collaborative theatre plays (*All My Presidents* (*Visi mani prezidenti*, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2011), *The Plan of National Development* (*Nacionālās attīstības plāns*, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2013), *Success Story* (*Veiksmes stāsts*, Latvian National Theatre, 2016), *Under Two Flags* (*Zem diviem karogiem*, Latvian National Theatre, 2019) and others) consistently address historical or contemporary documentary reality, all the while clothing it in original scenographic expression. Additionally, from 2014 to 2017 this creative tandem produced two theatre plays in Lithuania and one in Estonia: *Barricade* (co-created with Goda Dapšyte, Vilnius, 2014), *Forest Man* (Kaunas, 2015; Riga, 2018) and *Like Finland, But Much Better* (Viljandi, 2017).

All of Balodis' dramaturgic texts have a particular qualitative value. However, the final version of the text is formulated during rehearsals, with the

director and actors partially taking on the role of co-creators. Since his memorable debut and first collaboration with Sīlis in *All My Presidents*, Balodis has repeatedly proved that he feels most comfortable as an artist when working with documentary material. He gets his themes from Latvian contemporary reality – politics, the economy, the social situation, ecology. As a whole, Balodis' dramaturgy can be characterised by his interest in certain historical periods or certain social, economic and political issues rooted in a specific, authentic documentary experience. At the same time, his own views as an author about the selected historical period or issue are nevertheless always based on the current age and his current opinions. All of Balodis' plays exhibit typologically similar dramatic structure: first, he establishes the question or issue that bothers him, and then, closely following the facts, he creates the text as a detective novel. The contemporary dialogues seek to find out why some of the processes in Latvian (as well as in Lithuanian) recent history happened in the way that they did. And what it would be like if things had happened differently.

Many of Balodis' plays are written analytically, meaning that the time and action of the events are presented in reverse motion, starting from the time when the play was written and leading back to a definite moment in the past. The aim is to understand at what point and why the historical events changed the way they did. Although the time span of the play's action may be con-

siderably vast and the selection of the documentary facts that Balodis uses may be subjective, one can nonetheless unmistakably sense that he has perceived the interconnections of the respective historical period, because he has carefully sifted through historical press releases, interviews, memoranda and declarations. Moreover, it is evident that he has read the published documents as well as the endless streams of slogans, which frequently mean next to nothing, in a genuine effort to decipher their underlying meaning. However, the plays by Balodis and Sīlis are not merely political information or lectures about history or economics. Instead, they are theatre through and through – a never-ending play with masks, characters and transformations.

Some of the dramatists in Latvia have participated as performers in their own plays, including Balodis (*The Plan of National Development*, *Success Story*) and playwright and script writer **Matīss Gricmanis** (*To Be a Nationalist* (*Būt nacionālistam*, 2017). In fact, this has become a typical trait of contemporary theatre. The central event on stage is not a representation of the story but an intentional experience of the author's presence. In this case, the playwrights act as performers who, at a given moment on stage, materialise some of their own authentic physical or spiritual experiences.

One dramatist who has continuously recreated authentic material into dra-

maturgic form is **Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce**. For example, she reflected the real-life experience of specific individuals in such plays as *Me about Rēzija* (*Es par Rēziju*, also known by the name *0:0*, 2012), *Girls* (*Meitenes*, 2013) and *The Boy Who Could See in the Dark*

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The creation of text within the process of the production itself has already become a widespread practice in Latvian theatres.

(*Puika, kurš redzēja tumsā*, 2019). She also interpreted several different historical periods of the Latvian town of Liepāja in her play *Our Little Town: A Version about Liepāja* (*Mūsu pilsētiņa*, based on motifs from Thornton Wilder's play, 2016) and the collage of episodes titled *Liepāja – the Capital of Latvia* (*Liepāja – Latvijas galvaspilsēta*, 2018).

Dramatist and actor **Kārlis Krūmiņš** has written or co-authored texts about several controversial facts of Latvian history, such as the extradition of Latvian legionnaires to the Soviet Union in 1946 (*Legionnaires: A Discussion With a Fight* (*Leģionāri*), co-produced with Valters Sīlis, 2011); a Latvian writer, pastor, politician and participant in the coup d'état of 1919 (the thriller *Andrievs Niedra*, 2015); and an actor-spectator interactive play about the founding of the Latvian state in 1918

entitled *Meeting Place: Riga City Theatre II* (*Tikšanās vieta – Rīgas pilsētas II teātris*, 2018).

Among works based on documentary sources, one should also count two biographical plays by **Inga Ābele**. One of these is dedicated to the prominent Latvian romantic poet Aspazija, who lived and worked around the turn of the 20th century (*Aspazija: Personally* (*Aspazija. Personīgi*, 2015). The other is a one-act play about the Latvian modernist painter Aleksandra Beļcova, who lived in the first half of the 20th century – *The Master and Alexandra* (*Meistars un Aleksandra*, 2019). It should be noted that Ābele, who is the most significant Latvian dramatist of the first decade of the 21st century, has recently dedicated herself to writing prose and stage adaptations of works of prose.

Re-creation of existing texts

Director **Klāvs Mellis** (b. 1989) has staged three productions, for which he also co-created the text. He has worked with a frequently used strategy in contemporary theatre, namely, the use of a classic text as raw material that is then recreated from a new, often completely different ideological or aesthetic perspective.

As his graduation project, Mellis produced the play *Anthem* (*Himna*,

2108), in which he loosely adapted the novelette of the same title penned by Russian-American writer Ayn Rand (1905–1982) as well as another novel by Rand, *The Fountainhead*. Both texts were transferred to a contemporary context, to the experience of a modern person in present-day Europe. Later, Mellis and dramatist Justīne Kļava produced a play *Martin Eden* (2019), which used Jack London's novel of the same title, yet localised it in a self-centred bubble of contemporary Latvian intellectuals. Finally, in 2020, Mellis and playwright Evarts Melnalksnis created a sequel to – or autonomous story-line continuation of – Jane Austin's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Although the play kept several original characters and situations, it is actually an original work in its own right.

All three of the aforementioned productions by Mellis and their texts do not even bother to hide their connection with the original source – if anything, they emphasise it. However, the relationship with the internal structure of the original storyline is quite nuanced. The playbill of *Pride and Prejudice* announces that the story resumes “approximately fifteen years after the events of the novel have transpired. Yet some parts of what happened in the novel are elegantly ‘annulled’, while Austen's feminine perspective is subtly tinted by a masculine element.”⁶ And that is certainly correct. The storyline begins fifteen years after the wedding of the main couple in the novel, Elizabeth Bennet

and Mr. Darcy. However, neither of them take part in the play's action. The play also completely ignores the original plot of the weddings of Jane and Lydia. Consequently, the new version does not include Mr. Bingley or several other prominent characters of Austen's novel. In the version created by Mellis and Melnalksnis, the spectators become witnesses to what transpired one afternoon in the humble drawing room of the house in provincial England where the four unmarried Bennet sisters live. New neighbours have come to visit from afar – the twins Robert and Roberta May and their childhood playmate Sebastian McCorby. Robert has serious intentions towards Lydia Bennet, while Sebastian has for quite some time harboured tender feelings for his step-sister, Roberta.

One of the most interesting elements of Mellis' directorial style is his ability to attach a double meaning to an otherwise seemingly elementary melodramatic plot line. The literary genre of his *Pride and Prejudice* is that of a “sad drawing-room comedy”, and it conceptually toys with the images of Austen's classic novel and the significance of our contemporary life. At the basis of the plot structure of Austen's novel are two couples of the opposite sex – Elizabeth & Darcy as the leading protagonists and Jane & Bingley as the secondary protagonists – as well as Elizabeth & Jane and Darcy & Bingley as two same-sex couples serving as parallel protagonists. The story-line structure in the play by Mellis

and Melnalksnis remains similar. The game is on between two couples of the opposite sex – Lydia & Robert and Roberta & Sebastian get into confrontations on the topics of male and female pride and prejudice. In the original novel, the main relationships gradually proceed from mutual antipathy to mutual love. However, the complete opposite happens in the short time span of the play. The very witty dialogues quote, stylise and put a contemporary spin on the charming mannerisms of Austen's text.

A similar aesthetic style is present in the works of director **Regnārs Vaivars** (b. 1973), who deconstructs existing original texts and places selected characters and situations in a completely new story of his own making. His most recent production to reflect this style is the poetic libretto *Through the Marsh in the Fire* (*Purva bridējs ugunī*, 2019). It combines motifs from two different works written by the renowned Latvian playwright and representative of realism in drama Rūdolfs Blaumanis (1853–1908), the novel *Through the Marsh* (*Purva bridējs*, 1898) and the play *In the Fire* (*Ugunī*, 1905).

The texts that Mellis and Vaivars select and recreate for their plays are not merely objects of scenographic interpretation. Instead, they are the very foundation for the creation of the plays – a research tool to unlock the questions that the director finds important and intriguing.

6 Playbill of the production *Pride and Prejudice*, Latvian National Theatre, 2020

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Although plays are almost never published anymore, dramaturgy has become a respectable professional occupation in theatres.



Contemporary presentation of classic drama

Since 2014/2015, the Latvian Theatre Awards of the Performers' Night have included a category for Best Original Drama. Justīne Kļava, currently one of the artistically most persuasive and multifaceted personalities in Latvian dramaturgy, has received this award twice. She has produced several original adaptations of existing scripts or texts (*Jubilee '98*, based on motifs from Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* (2017); *Martins Eden*; *The Latvians (Latvieši)*, based on a book of the same title written by the 16th-century author Garlieb Merkel (2019) and others). She has also utilised documentary material (productions *Club "Paradise"* of 2018 and *In Search of a Performer (Meklējot spēlmani)*, 2019) and created plays for children (*Planet No. 85 (Planēta Nr. 85)*, 2018).

Notwithstanding this, Kļava has achieved a completely new level of quality when working within the framework of the tradition of classic Latvian drama in her plays *Ladies* (2016) and *Flea Market of Souls* (2017). These plays are characterised by a classical form (dialogues following the natural pattern of conversation, a linear story line, keenly perceived conflicts of the contemporary situation in Latvia) and original, non-borrowed content.

Flea Market of the Souls is one of the most significant original works of Latvian dramaturgy produced in the past decade. The action takes place in an apartment in present-day Riga. The residents of the apartment are

six young adults – Latvians Lāsma and Viesturs, Russian Vitaly, German Hermann, the Roma man Dollar and a Polish woman named Jadwiga – who converse with each other all night long. Their relationships represent a micro-model of our contemporary multicultural Latvian society, in which social and household problems become intertwined with unresolved historical issues. The communal flat – the most horrifying nightmare of Soviet domestic life – ironically becomes a voluntary and conscious housing choice among the contemporary youth. The stage presentation of one night in the domestic life of six young adults of different ethnicities is based on a very well-known psychological phenomenon, namely, petty kitchen-sink conflicts that tend to grow and grow, eventually escalating beyond anyone's control. "You placed the dirty pot on my shelf because I'm a Russian!" "You stole the bottle because you're a Gypsy!" And so forth. The title of the play is a phonetic allusion to a well-known Latvian novel (with Latvian *utenis* / *putenis* meaning 'flea market' / 'snowstorm'). It offers a very accurate testimony of the deconstruction of national pathos in contemporary Europe. What used to be a romanticised journey of souls (*putenis*, the snowstorm) has now turned into an ironic flea market of souls (*utenis*, a market for junk items).

Flea Market of Souls is by no means an infantile work, although the protagonists are drunk most of the time and constantly bickering amongst themselves. In reality, this is an hour-long "black comedy" performed on stage. However, the laughter here should be

Flea Market of Souls (Dvēseļu utenis)
Dirty Deal Teatro

Photo: Jānis Amoliņš

understood with the specific connotation of buffoonery of life and the arts, as explained by the Russian cultural philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) when analysing the cultural context of the Middle Ages: when the mighty and the lowly have exchanged their respective positions, then shared laughter helps to overcome the fear of the unknown. In the context of this play and performance, this axiom is conveyed in the following way: a gang of young theatre artists proceed to dethrone seemingly untouchable sacred things. The Great War has been transferred to the kitchen of a communal flat, and a squabble about a dirty pot airs uncomfortable issues regarding Latvia's past and present.

As the level of intoxication of the protagonists escalates together with the grotesque nature of the situation, Kļava creates a masterful dramatic counterpoint near the end of the play. Each character is allowed to present a short, individual story – the story of a Latvian, a Russian, a German, a Pole and a Roma. The stories are seemingly drawn from the life experiences of real people and all of them end with an ironic rhetorical question: “Yes, so it was like that, but what should I do about it?” The new generation, the generation of the creators of *Flea Market of the Souls*, is not afraid to call a spade a spade, to laugh about problems and coexist with them.

Actor and active dramatist **Artūrs Dīcis** (b. 1985) has also received the Performers' Night Award for Best Original Drama twice – once for the play *Even Whales Are Afraid* (*Arī vaļiem ir bail*, 218) and the second

time for *A Date with 50 Grams of Balsam* (*Randiņš ar 50 gramiem balzama*, 2019). Both texts can be regarded as a modern Latvian version of a well-crafted theatre play. They are characterised by domestically recognisable features of the 21st-century Latvian environment. The dialogues are nimble and clever, and Dīcis' take on the problems of the generation now in their thirties is self-derisive. His play *The Swamp Children* (*Purva bērni*, 2017), although aesthetically uneven, is innovative in its attempt to use the genre of dystopia.

Conclusion

The past decade in Latvian dramaturgy has been shaped by authors who were born in the 1980s and 90s. Alongside the authors mentioned in this article, one should also include Agnese Rutkēviča, Inga Gaile, Anete Konste, Laila Burāne, Ludmila Roziņa, Edgars Niklasons and others. This is the first generation whose aesthetic perceptions and understanding about the theatre have been entirely formed in the context of democracy and a seemingly borderless worldwide culture. Many of them have supplemented their education outside Latvia. In addition to working in the theatre, many of them also work in the fields of literature, cinema and education. Although plays are almost never published anymore, dramaturgy has become a respectable professional occupation in theatres. In the words of Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce, “Dur-

ing the past few years, the playwright has turned from a lone, mysterious, mythic person into a social being, a conversation partner for not only the

director but also the spectator, reader, costume designer, lighting technician, actor and other companions in the creation of a production.”⁷

7 Bugavičute, R., Preface // *Text in Contemporary Theatre: The Baltics within the World Experience*, ed. by Guna Zeltiņa with Sanita Reinsone (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar, 2013).

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Theatre Education in Latvia: Traditions and Challenges

In his book *Aesthetics of Absence*, German theatre director and composer Heiner Goebbels, who is also the long-term director of the Institute of Applied Theatre Studies (*Institut für Angewandte Theaterwissenschaft*) at Justus Liebig University in Giessen, has published “nine theses about the future of theatre education” under the significant title “Research or Craftsmanship”.¹ He reveals that theatre education was initially established as a talent bank for existing institutions, namely, for the existing “labour market”, and was not aimed at the creation of new aesthetics or questioning the work these institutions were carrying out. A similar approach can still be observed in Latvia, where actors are enrolled in theatre programmes for specific public theatres and their

curricula are mostly focused on mastering the disciplines related to the actor’s craft. Emerging directors, too, saw the fulfilment of their profession only within these repertory theatres. Work beyond these theatres was considered a failure, as opposed to an acknowledgement and achievement of special talent.

However, the situation has considerably changed over the past ten years. Independent theatres, associations of producers and informal artist groups have entered the picture, developing and maintaining themselves in the theatre environment of Latvia and consequently making it more diverse in terms of aesthetics and organisational forms and offering alternative models of action for emerging artists.

¹ Goebbels, H., *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 77-81.

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Independent theatres, associations of producers and informal artist groups have entered the picture, developing and maintaining themselves in the theatre environment of Latvia and consequently making it more diverse.



Disappearing Future
(Izzūdošā nākotne, LKA, 2018)
directed by Davide Giovanzana,
production of Drama acting students
with specialization in puppet theatre –
Agris Krapivņickis, Una Eglīte,
Elizabete Skrastiņa, Rihards Zelezņevs.

Photo: Kaiva Dreika

However, this is not an easy route due to the restricted financial means and resources; the path is not secure and also demands constant effort. Overall, the eight repertory theatres in Latvia (five in the capital city and three in the regions) are still the most important employers in the field of theatre, and to a certain degree they dictate the rules for theatre education as well. In the time since Latvia regained its independence, at least one of these theatres has created its own education course for resident actors in cooperation with the Latvian Academy of Culture (a leading higher education institution in performing arts in Latvia) or another partner.

Goebbels is of the opinion that one of the tasks of responsible educators in performing arts is to prepare emerging artists also for an insecure, unpredictable and complex future. He states that it is crucial to make a decision and choose either the skills to succeed in the craft or the path of artistic study. Theatre education in Latvia in the 21st century must also take into account the rapidly changing situation (in which the key factors affecting the theatre are increasing interdisciplinarity and performativity in art), the potential of theatre formation and production models against the backdrop of institutional crisis, and the impact of technologies and the “digital revolution” on theatre as a form of live art. This article focuses on the tradition of theatre education in Latvia, drawing attention to the preparation of actors

and directors since the 1990s as well as outlines the future challenges for theatre education.

The Heritage

The history of theatre education that prepared actors and directors for professional work in the theatre in Latvia dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. The first drama courses were organised in Latvia in 1909, and up until the Second World War acting skills could be acquired in numerous private classes and special workshops organised by several professional theatres. Along with the establishment of the Soviet regime, the question of a “centralised state institution for theatre education” was raised,² and in 1952 the Faculty of Theatre was established at the Latvian State Conservatoire (now the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music), where aspiring actors and directors studied up until 1993. When the Latvian Academy of Culture (Latvijas Kultūras akadēmija, LKA) was founded in 1990, along with the renewed state of Latvia, the studies in theatre acting and directing were transferred there. Furthermore, new directions in Latvian arts education were developed. For the first time in the history of Latvia, it was possible to study drama, film directing and the art of the director of photography. Since 1999, a programme in contemporary dance has also been available.

Today, LKA has become the leading university in Latvia providing studies in the performing arts, where it is possible to study acting and theatre directing both at the bachelor's and master's level, while certain cohorts of emerging actors are trained for Latvia's theatres beyond the capital city as well. These are mostly regional theatres such as the Daugavpils Theatre and the Liepāja Theatre, which are genuinely concerned about the reticent attitude of actors trained in Riga towards working outside the capital and the “sharks” of Riga's repertory theatres, which attract the most talented youth. The Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre can also be termed an outsider, because its working language is Russian and it relies on the Russian theatre tradition. I will focus on the tradition and strategy of theatre education at LKA, because this university is the dominant one in many aspects, including the number of graduates.

The only formally accepted and promoted method of theatre training during the Soviet era was the Stanislavsky system. The pedagogical legacies of Vsevolod Meyerhold, Mikhail Chekhov and other alternative methods, even if passed on to future generations as “embodied history” in the classes of particular masters, were not expressed loudly. Their texts and testimonies became available and were studied and published in Russia and other areas of influence of the Soviet Union only in the mid-1980s.

On the other hand, typed translations of the Polish theatrical reformer Jerzy Grotowski's recordings circulated among theatre professionals, inspiring a different view of acting technique. However, after regaining independence in the early 1990s, Latvian theatre education continued to adhere to the so-called “Russian school” tradition based on different variations and interpretations of the Stanislavsky system, which was still considered the main primer for theatre in Latvia. This was also due to the fact that the majority of the acting and directing teachers, such as stage directors Anna Eižvertiņa (b. 1945), Mihails Gruzdovs (b. 1953), Pēteris Krilovs (b. 1949) and Māra Ķimele (b. 1943) acquired their education in Russia or were students of these teachers, for instance, actress and director Indra Roga (b. 1968) and director Elmārs Seņkovs (b. 1984).

Professor Inga Pērkone, the compiler and scientific editor of the Te-Ki-La: Theatre and Cinema Readings yearbook of LKA scholarly articles published in 2012 and dedicated to the training of actors in Latvia, concluded in the book's introduction that “in general, we can talk about a uniform Latvian theatre training school based on the Konstantin Stanislavsky method enriched with the experience of the 20th and 21st centuries and psychological realism.”³ This is particularly true of the actor cohorts prepared outside the LKA, such as those for the Liepāja or Daugavpils theatres, because they have been trained taking into account

2 Akurātere, L., *Aktiermāksla latviešu teātrī* (Riga: Zinātne, 1983), 209.

3 *Te-Ki-La: Theatre and Cinema Readings* (Riga: Mansards, 2012), 8.

the context of Latvian theatre and often involving LKA teachers. A special case was the Liepāja Theatre Cohort (2006–2010), which was trained in collaboration with Klaipėda University in Lithuania and under the leadership of Lithuanian theatre artists Velta Anužienė (b. 1954) and Vytautas Anužis (b. 1956), who also acquired their theatrical education in Moscow. The strategy of the Liepāja Theatre to distance future actors from Riga and prepare the situation in such a way that the whole cohort could be accepted into the theatre troupe was entirely justified – the actors of this cohort, along with a number of powerful actors of the middle and older generations, currently form the core of the theatre troupe in that city. The Liepāja Theatre is currently preparing its next generation of emerging actors in cooperation with Liepāja University (2017–2021) and under the direction of the director and producer of the theatre, Herberts Laukšteins (b. 1954), who also studied theatre directing in Moscow.

Summary of the study process

The bachelor study programmes at LKA in acting and stage directing are four-year academic programmes, which means that, in addition to specialised subjects such as stage acting,

basics of stage directing and means of expression, stage movement, stage dance, stage speech, and solo and ensemble singing, an important role is also played by a theoretical subject block consisting of the history of literature, art, music and theatre, the theory of drama, cultural semiotics, etc. On the one hand, the study process at LKA still preserves a certain conservatism, focusing on dramatic theatre, working proportionally with the classics (the compulsory programme includes ancient tragedies, Shakespeare, Russian classics, Latvian dramaturgy, etc.) and allowing plenty of time for actor skills training. On the other hand, it is open to collaborations of varying intensity and scale, both domestically and internationally, which allows future theatre makers to acquire new, often interdisciplinary and international experiences in the context of the contemporary performing arts. For example, since 2017, every year three arts universities – LKA, the Art Academy of Latvia and the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music – have been working together on implementing the MALKKA project,⁴ in which future directors, contemporary dance choreographers, jazz musicians and illustrators work together for about two months in small groups on thematic études that are eventually combined into a public show. A good example of international cooperation is LKA's participation in Platform European Theatre Academies (PLETA),

which includes workshops, conferences and co-productions with the goal of incorporating international professional experience into study programmes as a mandatory component.

Traditionally, the cohort manager, or master, has a great degree of autonomy in the implementation of the education programme, so we speak about “Krīlovs’ actors”, “Ķīmele’s cohort”, “Gruzdovs’ cohort”, “Eižvertiņa’s cohort” or “Roga’s cohort”. The programme does not change on a broad scale, but the approach and accents vary. For example, for Krīlovs it is important to get to know the actors “from the inside” by developing very personal relationships with his students that, to some extent, lead to something like “interdependence” (for many former students, Krīlovs continues to be a mentor in their professional life). “The actor becomes the object of the teacher’s observation, which needs to be learned about from within so that the actor can do the same with others,” says Krīlovs, characterising his method.⁵ For Ķīmele, it is important “to make the emerging actors get as much sense as possible about different types of stage acting and different acting techniques.”⁶ Like Krīlovs,

Ķīmele also believes that stage directors should fully learn the art of acting (this principle is one of the cornerstones of stage directing education at LKA). Thanks to Ķīmele, the LKA has developed a regular collaboration with Finland-based director and educator Davide Giovanzana, who in intensive workshops and graduate

“ Stage directors should fully learn the art of acting.

work settings gives LKA’s actors and directors the opportunity to practise the techniques of Jacques Lecoq and *commedia dell’arte*. Gruzdovs, in turn, works in tandem with Roga, and describes their approach, which has resulted in a relatively closed system, as follows: “There is a professional programme which includes acting skills training, tasks and methodology for various stages of learning, and, parallel to that, there is a personality development programme which runs through various “rituals”, starting with a requirement for basic order.”⁷

In some cases, when the actor cohort is trained in cooperation with one of the public theatres, the group’s management is entrusted to the artistic director of the theatre in question.

⁴ The name, which translates to “firewood” in Latvian, is a play on words consisting of letters from the acronyms of the universities and has nothing to do with wood.

⁵ Kreicberga, Z., “Pēteris Krīlovs”, in *Te-Ki-La: Theatre and Cinema Readings* (Riga: Mansards, 2012), 102.

⁶ Murāne, A. and Pērkone, I., “Māra Ķīmele”, in *Te-Ki-La: Theatre and Cinema Readings* (Riga: Mansards, 2012), 113.

⁷ Murāne, A., “Indra Roga and Mihails Gruzdovs”, in *Te-Ki-La: Theatre and Cinema Readings* (Riga: Mansards, 2012), 137–138.



In the picture from left to right: Prof. Gunta Bāliņa (dance), prof. Edmunds Freibergs (acting), prof. emeritus Anna Eižvertiņa (acting), doc. Ruta Vitiņa (stage speech), asoc. prof. Mihails Gruzdovs (acting and stage directing), prof. Rūta Muktupāvela (rector of LKA), prof. Jānis Siliņš (theatre history), prof. emeritus Aina Matīsa (stage speech), asoc. prof. Indra Roga (acting and stage directing), prof. Olga Žitluhina (contemporary dance), prof. Pēteris Krilovs (acting, stage and film directing).

Photo: Kaiva Dreika

For example, LKA is currently (2018–2022) preparing actors for the New Riga Theatre, and the principal of the cohort is director Alvis Hermanis (b. 1965), for whom this is his first experience in theatre teaching. Starting already with their first year of study, the future actors have been working on their tasks in stage acting and stage speech as performances that are included in the theatre's repertoire and are regularly played to live

audiences, as opposed to the principle otherwise observed at LKA, that for at least the first two years students work in something like lab conditions and do not seek any publicly measurable result. It is interesting that Ķīmele (Hermanis' former acting teacher and the chair of the Bachelor of Dramatic Theatre study programme at LKA) has had a similar approach to educating future stage directors in recent years. Already from their first year onward,

they are required to create compositionally complete works (e.g., a fairy tale in the 1st semester, an interpretation of a work by the Latvian classicist Rūdolfs Blaumanis in the 2nd semester, a single act or excerpt of absurd dramaturgy in the 3rd semester, a prose excerpt from Fyodor Dostoyevsky in the 4th semester, an excerpt from a play by Shakespeare in the 5th semester, and a piece of realism dramaturgy in the 6th semester), which are presented to the public under training theatre conditions. Theatre and artistic directors are invited to these shows, thus establishing timely contacts with the professional environment so that at least some of the graduate performances in the directing programme are eventually staged and become part of the repertoire in professional theatres.

It is worth mentioning the fact that the LKA has, in cooperation with the Latvian Puppet Theatre, developed three special programmes (1992–1996; 2001–2005; 2015–2019) focusing on the art of performing objects and puppetry. Because LKA does not have permanent teachers specialising in puppet theatre, they are secured by involving artists from the puppet theatre and organising workshops with guest lecturers from abroad. The programme is based on the existing bachelor sub-programme in dramatic theatre stage acting and is complemented by study courses in puppet theatre styles and methods, puppet making and management techniques, and the history of puppet theatre. The graduates of these study groups are equally strong in both dramatic

theatre skills and puppet and performing object theatre specifics and stand out with their great autonomy and creativity. Thus, in 2005, upon completing their studies, a group of graduates founded the umka.lv theatre of objects, which established the genre of object theatre in Latvia and gained international recognition. In 2020, the graduates of the latest puppet cohort, together with their acting teacher and director Elmārs Senkovs, founded the independent ESARTE troupe. It should be concluded that, paradoxically, LKA has managed to provide more advanced education than required for the Latvian Puppet Theatre, which essentially operates in a traditional puppet theatre niche and serves primarily children's audiences. Another notable event in recent years worth mentioning is the creation in 2017 of the independent theatre group KVADRIFRONS, with four actors from LKA's 2015 graduating class continuing to show one of their graduation works and quickly becoming an active and sought-after theatre unit with its own écriture, where future theatre directors now do internships.

Alternative education

Despite focusing on the Stanislavsky system as the foundation of the performing arts, unanimously followed by not only the professors at LKA but also the organisers of other, alternative professional acting study programmes, the practice of contemporary theatre implemented by the



Disappearing Future
(Izzūdošā nākotne, LKA, 2018)

Since 2012, the students of performing arts at Latvian Academy of Culture have their own *blackbox* at Zirgu pasts, Theatre House of LKA

Photo: Kaiva Dreika

emerging theatres in Latvia has been defined by theatre critics both as postmodern in the 1990s⁸ and as post-dramatic in the 21st century.⁹ A school is not a system closed to the outside world; the "spirit of the times" impacts both the students and their teachers. It can be questioned to what extent the practice of emerging theatre devisers reveals the skills and knowledge obtained during their studies and to what extent it is formed as a result of (or despite) certain circumstances and contexts. Many of the active directors of the new generation included in the 2015 book *Latvijas jaunā režija*,¹⁰ for example, Mārtiņš Eihe (b. 1975), Andrejs Jarovojš (b. 1981), Viesturs Meikšāns (b. 1980), Inese Mičule (b. 1979), Vladislavs Nastavševs (b. 1978), Elmārs Seņkovs (b. 1984) and Valters Silis (b. 1985), are of the opinion that

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It is evident that, in the practice of emerging theatre devisers, it is not so crucial to follow the hierarchy of dramatic theatre or certain disciplines.

their work in theatre has been strongly and importantly affected by alternative education and international opportunities provided mostly by the activities of the New Theatre Institute of Latvia (NTIL) – such as the Homo Novus International Festival of

Contemporary Theatre, the Homo Alibi Experimental Theatre Festival and various master classes – and participation in international networking projects and festivals. In fact, the founder of both the NTIL and Homo Novus is LKA professor Pēteris Krilovs. Being an active and curious theatre and film practitioner in the 1990s, Krilovs also began several other initiatives related to theatre education which at that time broadened the understanding of theatre and intensively integrated international experience in Latvia, turning it into a necessity for the newest theatre generation.¹¹

8 See: Radzobe, S. (ed.), *Postmodernisms teātrī un drāmā* (Riga: Jumava, 2004).

9 Radzobe, Z., "Latvijas jaunās režijas jaunā valoda", in *Latvijas jaunā režija*, ed. Silvija Radzobe (Riga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds), 25–35.

10 Radzobe, S. (ed.), *Latvijas jaunā režija* (Riga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2015).

11 In 1995 Krilovs and his contemporaries founded the Homo Novus International Festival of Contemporary Theatre, which was launched in Daugavpils and dedicated to theatre education in the changed circumstances of the newly independent country. The festival provided a platform for theatre performances from Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian and Russian theatre schools as well as many discussions and master classes. In 1996, the Michael Chekhov Summer School took place in Jūrmala, with the participation of outstanding interpreters of Chekhov's method from all over the world. In 1998, on the initiative of Krilovs, the New Theatre Institute of Latvia was founded. It continues to play a crucial role in the development and internationalisation of theatre processes in Latvia.

Future challenges

Reflections and discussions about the content of the curricula, formats, methodology and compliance of the performing arts to the needs of contemporary theatre have also been raised in the last few years in various international contexts and formats under such eloquent titles as, for example, *Teaching to Transgress*, *Giesen and Others – Cross-disciplinary Theatre Education*, *Mind the Gap*, *Future School*, *Learning for the Future*, etc.¹² On the one hand, theatre is still considered to be a language- and text-based art meant for national audiences and continues to follow inherited traditions. This inertia is also maintained in the system of education. On the other hand, the “performative turn”¹³ noticed by theatre researchers and the “postdramatic theatre”¹⁴ paradigm have considerably changed the landscape of contemporary theatre, and performing arts education tends to react accordingly. The following example illustrates this situation in the context of Latvia. If comparatively recently there was a serious discussion among LKA pedagogues regarding theatre directing studies, namely, whether it is permissible that the graduation work is implemented as a devised performance, then in 2019 only one out of six graduates of the

LKA master’s programme in theatre staged a complete dramaturgical work; the rest mostly created the required material during the rehearsal process, examining interactive theatre, theatre of the senses, documentary theatre, synthesis between theatre and contemporary dance, etc.

It is evident that, in the practice of emerging theatre devisers, it is not so crucial to follow the hierarchy of dramatic theatre or certain disciplines. They devise collectively and change roles; for instance, a playwright or a director becomes a performer, engaging “non-actors” in performances, etc. Perhaps the actor’s transformation into a performer, the performance into an event, and the actor into a participant – all approbated in the practice and theory of contemporary theatre – should in the future be strictly taken into account, including the respective skills and competencies in performing arts education. However, can we claim that conventional dramatic theatre, a director’s capability to analyse a play and an actor’s capability to embody a role will not be important or on trend? One of the most essential things is to find balance – how to appreciate and not to lose something that is valuable and unique in our classical education, at the same time facilitating the independence and responsibility of

emerging artists for the choices they make. “[...] we should educate clever young artists who are also capable of developing their own aesthetics. And as their teachers we shouldn’t pretend that we already know what that should look like. We don’t know. The future of performing arts is, I hope, unpredict-

able, and in order to prepare our students for this complex reality, we have to involve them in our own research and put them in the position to conduct their own experiments.”¹⁵ Agreeing with Heiner Goebbels’ opinion, I wish you well on your path into the unknown.¹⁶

12 Over the past three years, the author of this article has participated in at least ten international forums and discussions dedicated to the performing arts and taking place in Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Germany.

13 See, for example: Fischer-Lichte, E., *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

14 See: Lehmann, H.-T., *Postdramatic Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

15 Goebbels, H., *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 77.

16 This article was written in March 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, when an emergency situation was in force in Latvia, as it was in many other countries all over the world. Consequently, there were restrictions on gatherings of people and suspension of studies at higher education establishments. The students and faculty of performing arts had to be especially creative in order to find ways to continue practical classes based on close contact and communication. Another question is how and whether theatre itself will change after this intensely remote and digital experience, during which it has been possible to watch so many theatre performances from digital archives all over the world for free and many theatre troupes collectively organised rehearsals on the Zoom digital platform.

Liminal Performances: In-Between Threshold States

Liminality as a theoretical framework can be used in the contexts of various research fields, yet primarily it is drawn from the discourses related to social sciences, especially anthropology. The Latin word *limen* means 'threshold', whereas liminality refers to the physiological, psychological and spiritual experience of threshold states. As a concept, it was first introduced by the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) in his 1909 book *Les Rites de Passage* (Rites of Passage). Van Gennep noted the importance of rites marking the passage of an individual or social group from one identity or status to another, for example, the transition from childhood to adulthood. Further on, the concept of liminality was discussed by the

British anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983), American performance theorist and theatre director Richard Schechner (b. 1934) and German professor of theatre studies Erika Fischer-Lichte (b. 1943), to name just a few. In her 2008 book *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Fischer-Lichte writes that liminality is accompanied by a profound sense of destabilisation¹ in which the traditional dichotomies and binary oppositions are overturned. For example, through active engagement in a performance piece, a spectator may become a performer or a participant and vice versa. The collapse of dichotomies consequently leads to a liminal experience in which it is difficult to mark a boundary between "this is art / theatre" and "this is reality" (or "representation"

1 Fischer-Lichte, E. *The Transformative Power of Performance*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 157.



“

Through active engagement in a performance piece, a spectator may become a performer or a participant and vice versa.

Bearman (Lāčuvīrs)
Laboratory of Stage Arts

Photo: Paulis Jakušonoks

and “presence”, respectively).²

According to British professor Susan Broadhurst in her 1999 book *Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory*, “all liminal works confront, offend or unsettle”³. She writes that hybridisation, indeterminacy, experimentation, heterogeneity, innovation, marginality and the centrality of non-linguistic modes of signification appear to be among the quintessential aesthetic features of the liminal⁴. To understand the liminal in performing arts, Broadhurst offers the framework of intersemiotic analysis. This means that, for example, all separate units or elements in a performance piece, such as a dance, costume design, video projections, digital technologies, the performer’s body, etc., can be regarded as separate “texts”, which together create meaning beyond verbal language. Often, such works are experimental, multi- and interdisciplinary and ritualistic.⁵ One of the examples Broadhurst offers to define liminal

performances is the Tanztheater of Pina Bausch, which is a hybrid form between dance and theatre.

In this context, performance art as a hybrid between visual arts and theatre offers a testing ground for liminal practice. In Latvia, performance art has always been marginal and practised rather sporadically by visual artists who from time to time want to experiment with new disciplines. On very few occasions, theatre actors have also tried out these trajectories, for example, Dārta Daneviča and Elīna Dzelme, who in May 2014 spent twenty-four hours in a transparent box of glass during their performance *Dzīvo damies* (lit. *Live-Ing*) at Kalnciema Street Quarter in Riga. As an ephemeral, transient and immaterial process-based act, performance art defies the rules of objecthood and thus commodification – it is difficult to sell. To address this lack of exposure and visibility, the Latvian Centre for Performance Art (LCPA) was founded in 2018. One of the LCPA’s initiatives is

the annual “Starptelpa” International Performance Art Festival, which offers a platform for local and international performance artists to exhibit their works. Starptelpa, which translates as ‘in-between space’, focuses on the concept of liminality, in which the constant dissolving of boundaries, as well as hybridisation, is nurtured.

At the Starptelpa festival, both group performances, devised through collaboration, and individual performances are presented. The festival offers a panoramic and kaleidoscopic view of a myriad of creative and conceptual strategies employed by the artists to explore the concept of liminality.⁶ For example, in the group performance *Bearman* (*Lāčuvīrs*, 2018) directed by Simona Orinska, the concept of liminality was revealed from multiple perspectives.

First of all, *Bearman* exposed hybridity in terms of traditions and symbols from three cultures: Japanese, Sami and Latvian. The Japanese culture was introduced in the performance through the Butoh performing tradition implemented by the IDEAGNŌSIS performing arts group. The Sami and Latvian cultures were represented through

music, with the Sami singer Torgeir Vassvik singing in the ancient *yoik* tradition of the Sami people and Sanita Sprūža playing the kokle, a traditional Latvian musical instrument. Moreover, the bear is a sacred, totemic animal in both Sami and Latvian mythology and folklore. Our ancestors believed that the bear was a creature in between a human and an animal.⁷

Second, liminality was revealed on the narrative level, with the story unfolding as an initiation ritual in which a Bearman (performed by Arvis Kantiševs) was born. The birth of a

“ As an ephemeral, transient and immaterial process-based act, performance art defies the rules of objecthood and thus commodification – it is difficult to sell.

new man was revealed as a complex process in which the masculine and feminine, as well as the creative and destructive, primordial forces embodied by the Butoh dancers collided in a cathartic, ecstatic clash, leaving the Bearman empty, exhausted and in stasis. The new man could only be born from this empty shell. The birth was

2 The concept of liminality, in which hierarchies and norms disappear, also resonates with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival. Pursuant to Bakhtin’s definition, “carnivals are playful subversions of the established social and political order of things, which might otherwise appear fixed. Through common practices of masquerade, the burning of effigies, the desecration of sacred objects and spaces, and excessive indulgences of the body, carnivals loosen the hold of the dominant order, breaking free – though only for a time – from law, tradition, and all that enforces normative social behavior” (Auslander 2008: 41–42).

3 Broadhurst, S. *Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory*. (Bloomsbury. 1999), 168.

4 Ibid. 11–13.

5 An earlier attempt to define a theatre that would advocate a system of signs beyond the dramatic text was expressed by Antonin Artaud in his 1933 book *Theatre and Its Double*. From Artaud’s perspective, theatre should be seen as a rich source for semiotic experiments with a certain “visual language of objects, movements, attitudes, and gestures, but on condition that their meanings, their physiognomies, their combinations be carried to the point of becoming signs, making a kind of alphabet out of these signs” (Artaud 1958 [1933]: 90).

6 Every year, a new thematic scope is employed (liminality in 2018; control in 2019; ritual and myth in 2020).

7 For example, “Aijā žūžū, lāča bērni” (Hushaby, hushaby, bear cubs) is an ancient Latvian lullaby in which a bear is identified as a human, since according to ancient mythology, humans descended from bears. In fact, a motif from this particular lullaby was also integrated in the closing part of *Bearman*.

“

Liminality in the work of individual performers is often explored through the problematic concept of authenticity, which is juxtaposed to acting and “pretending” in theatre.



Bearman (Lāčuvīrs)
Laboratory of Stage Arts

Photo: Paulis Jakušonoks

also signified through universal symbols of motherhood. The Bear Mother and ancestress was performed by voice improviser and singer Dana Indāne-Surkienė, who was heavily pregnant at the time of the performance, whereas the movements of the Butoh dancers were choreographed so that at one moment their bodies formed a nest, and at another moment their rhythmical movements referred to labour contractions. Overall, the performance was devised as a process of transformation, and liminality was presented through the initiation ritual as “a transitional state filled with ambiguities and contradictions”⁸.

It should be emphasised that, apart from Vassvik’s singing in the Sami language, the performance was

absolutely non-verbal; thus, liminality was also revealed through the non-linguistic mode of signification, a feature noted by Broadhurst. The Butoh dancers produced non-articulated sounds, laughter, sighs, cries and groans, and these noises provided a certain rhythm to the performance, yet at the same time they symbolised primeval forms of existence or the pre-verbal stage of human development. Indeed, such an Artaudian devising technique developed a “unique language half-way between gesture and thought”⁹. In this context, the white bodies of the Butoh dancers in *Bearman* could also be regarded as semiotic signs and carriers of meaning.¹⁰ According to Japanese theatre scholar Gunji Masakatsu, the white colour in Butoh is ambiguous: “On the one hand, white represents a world with no colour whatsoever and is a sign of the world of the dead; on the other hand, it is a sign of the world of the living and denotes the white light of the sun”¹¹. This kind of in-betweenness added another layer to the concept of liminality explored in the performance.

Liminality in the work of individual performers is often explored through the problematic concept of authenticity, which is juxtaposed to acting and

⁸ Westerveld, J. *Liminality in Contemporary Art*, 2011. <http://www.judithwesterveld.nl/presandpublications.html>.

⁹ Artaud, A. *The Theatre and Its Double*. (New York: Grove Press, 1958 [1933]), 84–100.

¹⁰ Another non-verbal and yet important component of the performance was revealed through the kinetic, revolving video projections created by the artist Gita Straustina. These projections not only served as instruments of stage design to add a surreal and dreamlike atmosphere, but also delivered the concept of the cosmic bear.

¹¹ Masakatsu, G. Butoh and Taboo. In: Baird, B., Candelario, R. (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), np.

"pretending" in theatre. Performance artists frequently create works that are based on autobiographical experiences or questions of identity. Consequently, performing in performance art differs from acting in theatre, in which:

The performer goes from the "ordinary world" to the "performative world", from one time / space reference to another, from one personality to one or more others. He plays a character, battles demons, goes into trance, travels to the sky or under the sea or earth: he is transformed, enabled to do things "in performance" he cannot do ordinarily.¹²

Instead of playing a fictitious character from a dramatic text, for example, Hamlet, performance artists are suspended in an in-between state in which they perform and act out themselves. For example, in her 2019 performance *Genderbender* artist Laura Šterna drew attention to the social pressure she constantly experiences because of her androgynous look. The forty-minute-long performance had a minimalistic mise-en-scène – there were just a few props, such as a bicycle and a mirror, and a screen on which various comments that she had heard in real life were projected ("Are you a girl or a boy?" "Hey, dude, pass the ball!" "Do you know that you're in a women's bathroom?"). During the performance, Šterna attempted to show that the binary representation of

"male" and "female" is a form of social performance to adapt to society's expectations. By putting on a feminine look with the help of make-up, high heels and a dress and then exchanging them for a boyish look with a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, Šterna demonstrated that gender representation is performative and that, like her, some people do not belong to either of the binary categories – indeed, they are in-between. By engaging the spectators in the performance and asking them to help her wax her legs, Šterna also broke down the binary opposition between the viewer and performer. Such participatory experience was liminal to the viewers, because it made them question the prescribed rules, norms and order, as well as boundaries, between art and life.

Performance artists explore another aspect of liminality by testing their physical and psychological limits. Often such performances are durational and last several hours. Fischer-Lichte writes that liminality becomes especially apparent in performances involving self-injury:

These performances erase valid rules and norms and establish a state of radical betwixt and between for all participants, even for the artists inflicting injuries on themselves. In this situation a purely "aesthetic" response would border on voyeurism and sadism. Ethical responses, however, contain the risk of violating

the artist's intentions. These performances plunge the spectators into a crisis.¹³

Although no artists have injured themselves at the Starptelpa festival, the threshold of endurance has been tested several times. For example, the *Mørketid* photography exhibition was organised as part of Starptelpa in 2019. It focused on the visualisation of depression by combining performance and photography. At the exhibition opening, artist Anna Maskava stood with her head bent down for two hours while pouring water on her head and long blonde hair. This repetitive, monotonous movement in the quiet gallery space, where only three to four spectators could enter at a time, gave rise to strong associations with the cyclical nature of depression, immobility and feelings of being trapped and caged. Some spectators were touched emotionally so powerfully that they wept. After the performance, Maskava acknowledged that she had lost the sense of time and experienced a state of trance during those two hours.

At the 2018 edition of the festival, artist Daniela Vētra in her performance *The Unbearable Heaviness of Oxygen* (*Skābekļa nepanesamais smagums*) asked the spectators to choose a stone, which was weighed and registered by her assistants. Then each

spectator put their stone in a special costume worn by Vētra. The total weight of the stones reached 120 kilograms, and then Vētra – in the heavy costume – was lifted up in the air at least three metres above the ground. She proceeded to slowly get rid of the stones, throwing each stone down one by one and saying "thank you". The spectators at this performance also experienced a liminal state, because Vētra had an attachable microphone and her heavy sighs indicated how hard it was to hold the stones on her tiny body. On a symbolic level, through her physical and mental distress Vētra showed that a person is able to endure only so much.¹⁴ Though she voluntarily took on the heaviness from others, she also retained control over the maximum limit.

Because liminality can also occur as a result of hybridity when artists integrate various modes of representation and technologies in their performances, Anda Lāce's performance *All the best! (Daudz laimes!)* performed at Starptelpa in 2018 should also be mentioned.¹⁵ In it, Lāce worked with several layers of time: the objects (all kinds of crockery inherited from previous generations) represented the layer of past; the big screen behind the installation, where all the crockery was carefully placed in huge piles by the artist during the performance,

12 Schechner, R. *Between Theatre and Anthropology*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 126.

13 Fischer-Lichte, E. *The Transformative Power of Performance*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 176.

14 After the performance, Vētra said that at one point her rib cage was pressed so hard that it was difficult for her to breathe.

15 For this performance, Lāce was nominated for the prestigious Purvītis Prize in 2018.

projected the gaze of the artist that was tracked by a real-time camera attached to her head; and occasionally, the real-time frames were interrupted by a speedy rotation of photographs of the artist that could be found on the Internet, registering yet another layer of time. The performance ended with Lāce smashing the crockery while balancing on the installation. Not only did she literally and metaphorically destroy this heritage; she also referenced a culturally specific idiom about smashing crockery.¹⁶ To a certain degree, *All the best!* resonates with the performance by Vētra described previously, because both

artists rid themselves of a burden.

To conclude, the concept of liminality not only in performance art, but also in the performing arts overall, can be examined from various perspectives. As such, it offers fertile ground for theatre and performance theoreticians. Liminality can be addressed from the point of view of the performers, audiences, engagement and interaction between performers and audiences, mise-en-scène, a system of semiotic signs, and the experience and integration of technologies. This list is not exhaustive, and the next Starptelpa festival will definitely bring new examples of liminality.

16 When one accidentally smashes a plate or a cup in Latvia, it is perceived as a sign of luck and happiness.

Theatre Research Studies at the University of Latvia: Contingent and Methodology

Dr. philol., Dr. habil. art. prof.

Silvija Radzobe
(1950-2020)



This page comes instead of the article that was not written. It was suspended by the will of the almighty stage Director above us in last days of April, shortly before the 70th anniversary of the distinguished professor, theatre critic and the *Maestra* of many current Latvian theatre critics as well as bright personality on- and off- stage of her long professional career.

By the late 1980s, Silvija Radzobe was a bustling and regularly published theatre critic, editor of the almanac "Theatre and Life", co-author of several books about the history of theatre, an excellent organizer, and the head of the Division of Young Theatre Critics at the Theatre Association. One would assume that Silvija Radzobe was set to continue on this course for a long time to come.

That was so until the year 1991, when, after the restoration of the independence of Latvia, the state severed the ties with the Moscow State Institute of Theatre Arts (GITIS) - the previous foundry of the next generation of theatre critics.

The idea that one could train theatre researchers right here in Latvia was simultaneously conceived by two people: by Silvija Radzobe who at that time worked at the Division of Arts of the Institute of Language and Literature, the Latvian Academy of Sciences, and by Ieva Kalniņa who was the head of the Literature Studies in the Department of Philology, the University of Latvia. Silvija Radzobe had ideas, inexhaustible enthusiasm for theatre and a love for education. Ieva Kalniņa had means to

secure institutional weight and support for Silvija's endeavors. It was a fortunate pairing that allowed Silvija Radzobe to create an academic specialization in theatre studies and to raise several generations of theatre critics. Today her graduates are active influencers of Latvian cultural processes, regardless of whether they write about theatre or work in some other professional field. If I'm not mistaken, there were nine graduations of bachelors' and masters' classes during her tenure.

The work ethic of Silvija Radzobe should be characterized as truly phenomenal. She was a talented theatre critic, inexhaustibly interesting writer and speaker, researcher and historian, a professor in the Department of Humanities at the University of Latvia, the corresponding member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, editor and co-author of many books about theatre. Her most significant books (and, by the way, the thickest) are the three volumes of "The 20th Century Theatre Production in Latvia and in the World" (2002-2009), "Theatre Production in the Baltics" (2006) that received the Baltic Assembly Award, and, unquestionably, her most recent and most prominent work in two volumes,

"100 Outstanding Latvian Actors" (2019) – a collaborative work of 22 theatre critics and researchers.

Silvija Radzobe had two loves in literature – Latvian poet Aleksandrs Čaks and Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov. She succeeded in dedicating two books to the first one of her loves: "Brochure About My Hate" (1990) and "The Case of "Cosmopolitans" and Aleksandrs Čaks: A Documentary Chronicle With Annotations" (2017). The completion of her third work, conceived several years ago, is now entrusted to her daughter Zane who is also a theatre researcher and critic. Regrettably, Radzobe's work about Mikhail Bulgakov remains as an unfinished project, contained in her writings, outlines, and notes of her fascinatingly interesting lectures.

Although born in spring, her favourite flower was dahlia, the queen of autumn. On 29th April, the 70th anniversary of Silvija Radzobe, the Facebook timelines were silently blossoming in dahlias of all colours. This year, many of us, members of Latvian theatre community, planted at least a few dahlias this spring to cherish the memory of a passionate theatre lover, fervent critic, and a colleague whose loss leaves a blank page not only in this bookazine, but also in written story of Latvian theatre criticism after the Restoration of Independence in 1991.

INTA BALODE

Dance critic, curator, performer

Towards Invisible Choreography

Some Thoughts on Latvian Theatre Meeting Contemporary Choreography

“ The condition of being unseen is a fantasy of power, and a metaphor for powerlessness.¹

There is a state of emergency in Latvia due to the global Covid-19 crisis². What will the performing arts be like in the new normal, whenever that comes? All performances have been postponed while we fight the invisible. This inspired me to think about how the invisible layers of reality link to invisibility as a powerful tool in contemporary choreography, choreogra-

phy having had a large impact on the development of the theatre scene in Latvia over the past decade. And choreography having struggled, despite this growing impact, with invisibility due to the low status of dance resulting from ignorance at various levels, from cultural policy makers and venue management to actors, audiences, theatre critics and the media.

1 Kathryn Schulz, "Sight unseen: The hows and whys of invisibility," *New Yorker*, April 13, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/04/13/sight-unseen-critic-at-large-kathryn-schulz>

2 The article was written in spring 2020 during the worldwide pandemic of Covid-19 virus.



“ Last call for audience members to join performers to try out the movement phrase they have seen many times. Don't be shy, we turn our backs not to see you...

She dances (Viņa dejo, 2016)
Created and performed by
Santa Grīnfelde, Krista Briģe,
Inta Balode

Photo: Žanna Mironova



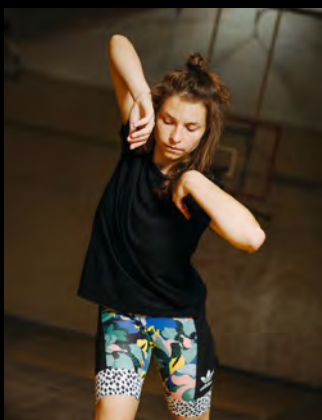
Kristīne Brīniņa⁴

"At the very base of dance as an abstract art form lies a task to access the broader layers of what the human being is. To make visible what is often hidden behind words and ideas about proper behaviour. The process of dance is to get deeper into the invisible forms of human existence and find a way to show them. For me it is the physicality of the ungraspable, the invisible."³



Liene Grava⁶

"It is a very pleasant and enjoyable process when the director and I have a similar vision for how dance and movement are integrated within the performance. However, there have been a few cases when I have asked the theatre management to release me from the choreographer's position, because there has been an absolute mismatch of taste and opinions with a specific director."⁵



Elīna Lutce⁸

"The director invites me to collaborate so that I work with the overall rhythm of the performance, the physical presence of the actors over the duration of the whole performance. That's why, if somebody needs to know the length of the choreography in minutes, I say that it's the same as the duration of the performance."⁷

"In contemporary dance everything is more nuanced than just 'let's dance now', which is what one often encounters in the theatre as the common understanding of what dance is. You need to offer a different experience, so that after the premiere the actors smile and say, 'We kind of did not dance, but there was so much choreography!'"⁹

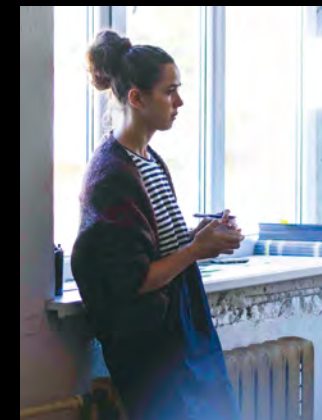
Jana Jacuka¹⁰

"It's quite rare that critics mention something broader about the movement scores for performances. Maybe they don't see them, maybe they don't find them significant, maybe they think that the actors move like that naturally and are just great actors."¹¹

Agate Bankava¹²

I am a dance advocate. Contemporary dance saved my life. I wrote my BA paper about the death in Tibetan Buddhism and the MA paper about the concept of emptiness. After that my soul started separating from the body, I saw myself from above, and I am not kidding. Since then, I stand for dance and talk for dance. Dance gives me the best philosophical questions and answers. However, due to the underdog status among other arts, the wisdom of dance is often overlooked. I want to give more voice to dance through its own language.

Inta Balode¹³



- 3 Interview with Kristīne Brīniņa, *Facebook Messenger* video chat, March 12, 2020.
- 4 **Kristīne Brīniņa** is an independent Latvian choreographer and dancer who lives and works in Latvia. She graduated from the Dance Department of the Latvian Academy of Culture in Riga in 2011 and has since then been active as a solo artist, also working in collaboration with other artists and non-professionals. Her work is inspired by daily life as well as situations and encounters with strangers, which she transmits on stage with empathy and humour. In 2014 Brīniņa moved to the countryside in Ķirava where, together with her husband, she runs an artists' residency in an old watermill, testing out different ways of local involvement. According to stage director Valters Silis, "Kristīne Brīniņa finds the spaces where dance is still present within art and life, and then turns them into a performance."
- 5 Interview with Liene Grava, *Facebook Messenger*, March 18, 2020.
- 6 **Liene Grava** is a choreographer and dancer of contemporary dance. In 2011 she graduated from the Department of Contemporary Dance Choreography at the Latvian Academy of Culture. Since 2010, in collaboration with the best Latvian directors, she has done choreography for state and non-governmental theatres as well as independent projects. She has been nominated for the "Spēlmaņu nakts" Latvian Theatre Award four times in the Choreographer of the Year category. In 2014 she won this award for *Piaf* and *Red Damn Moon*. In 2018 she created a performance called *Filament*, which was Latvia's first-ever vertical dance show.
- 7 Interview with Elīna Lutce, email, March 2, 2020.
- 8 **Elīna Lutce** (since 2020 Gediņa) studied dance and choreography at the Latvian Academy of Culture. After graduation in 2011 she has worked as an independent choreographer and dancer, presenting her work at independent venues in Riga. Lutce has collaborated with theatre directors Elmārs Seņkovs and Viesturs Kairiņš on several drama productions at the Latvian National Theatre and Latvian National Opera. As a performer, Lutce has worked with choreographers Koen Augustijnen, Willi Dorner, Heine Avdal and Yukiko Shinozaki, and Contact Gonzo.
- 9 Interview with Jana Jacuka, email, March 9, 2020.
- 10 **Jana Jacuka** is a performer and choreographer who has a bachelor's degree in contemporary dance art from the Latvian Academy of Culture. She is currently active in the field of dance and theatre in Latvia and also finds ways to combine her interests in sound design through movement in her performances. Jacuka was nominated for the Latvian Dance Award in the Performer of the Year 2017–2018 category as well as for the "Spēlmaņu nakts" Latvian Theatre Award in the Movement Director of the Year category in 2019.
- 11 Interview with Agate Bankava, *Facebook Messenger*, March 8 and 10, 2020.
- 12 **Agate Bankava's** work is characterised by an interest in movement as an artistic language in its own right, which she uses to communicate with the spectator as an equal. In 2019 Bankava received the first annual Latvian Dance Award for Best Contemporary Dance Choreographer for her works *Bad*, *Memor* and *Future Freak*. She received the "Spēlmaņu nakts" Latvian Theatre Award in the Movement Artist of the Year category for *Blow*, *Wind!* (collaboration with choreographer Jānis Purviņš) in the 2018/2019 theatre season.
- 13 **Inta Balode** is a dance writer, curator, dramaturge and performer. Since 2004, Inta has been curating dance projects, including seminars for artists, journalists and managers, as well as mini-festival "New Dance in a New Place". Inta holds MA degree in Theory of Culture, she acquired additional training in dance writing and management in the USA and Europe. While working as dance expert at the State Culture Capital Foundation and jury of Performers' Night, she managed to lobby for the status of contemporary dance. Inta is a member of Latvian Dance Council – a consultative group at the Ministry of Culture and one of the founders of international non-profit organization LAUKKU (www.laukku.lv) as well as runs Latvian Dance Information Centre (www.dance.lv).

To look back upon the past decade of Latvian theatre meeting contemporary choreography, I interviewed the five young female choreographers quoted above: **Agate Bankava, Kristīne Brīniņa, Liene Grava, Jana Jacuka** and **Elīna Lutce**. They work regularly within the Latvian public and independent theatre system and at the same time have their own dance practices. I consciously chose choreographers who create their own work and consider themselves primarily dance artists. This helps to highlight problems that would not be so clear or would not come up at all for choreographers working only in a subordinate role. Over the past years, the role of choreographers has changed a lot, and they are not the only traditionally subordinate role wanting to make their voices stronger and more visible. Although the overall trajectory towards interdisciplinarity in the performing arts scene is still very new, the young generation of artists is part of this new world wishing to overcome hierarchic structures and become engaged in the creation of art on equal terms.

I quote the five choreographers extensively without interfering much with or analysing their statements in order to give them a direct voice and let the reader get to know the artists and draw their own conclusions about the exciting encounter between the worlds of the word and the body.

A time for words and a time for the body

“The body cannot talk because it is language in itself.”¹⁴

Over the past decade and more, the theatre scene has become a “regular playground” for ambitious and talented contemporary dance choreographers to work on a bigger scale for more appropriate fees and more visibility. Dance and theatre professionals collaborate on a regular basis, resulting in strong links between the two fields and affecting both sides in terms of working methods, value systems, audiences, the role of text and the level of abstractness possible.

The work of a choreographer in the theatre lies at the intersection of invisibility as power in dance and being unseen as an ongoing troublemaker. Stage directors rationally and intuitively feel the need to bring into their productions choreography that is able to make visible the deep hidden layers of the reality taking place on stage. Simultaneously, the low status of dance leads to unnecessary tension in the creative and assessing processes.

The relationship between a stage director and choreographer can be

14 Marija Saveiko, “Ķermenis nevar runāt”, <https://dance.lv/kermenis-nevar-runat-jo-tas-pats-ir-runa-intervija-ar-tatjanu-gordejevu/>

seen as similar to that between an architect and engineer, or a designer and sculptor. The choreographer is directly responsible for the embodiment of the idea in a figural sense and very literally putting it into the performers' bodies. The choreographer is the medium between the stage director and the actor or singer. The choreographer is in the role of a priest translating God's message into the flesh. As Richard Rohr said in his talk in Riga, "It would be quite stupid to think that God sent his son to become flesh in order to learn how to overcome it."¹⁵

“The relationship between a stage director and choreographer can be seen as similar to that between an architect and engineer, or a designer and sculptor. The choreographer is directly responsible for the embodiment of the idea in a figural sense and very literally putting it into the performers' bodies.

The Latvian theatre tradition is mostly text-based, and theatre criticism is also mostly oriented towards analysing this kind of theatre. Other languages are quite foreign to both theatre-makers and audiences. In this context, the language of dance is one of the most cryptic, and even more tricky is the fact that it is not seen as a language at all but as an illustration of something else. Whenever it be-

comes complicated to translate it into words, in best-case scenario confusion sets in; in the worst case, it leads to the denial of dance as an art form. This is why choreographers quite significantly adjust their working methods after having begun working in the field of theatre.

An interesting issue is the choice of showing movement on a choreographer's body, that is, teaching through demonstration, which leads to learning by mimetic repetition. Grava says actors and musicians need to be shown everything. Jacuka also stresses the need to show everything in order to avoid misunderstandings. However, this might not be the case in the work of Elina Lutce, Agate Bankava and Kristīne Brīniņa, especially when working with stage

directors who have "choreographic thinking" and when having enough time to do their work.

Regardless of the nuances when working more with readymade movement phrases or offering more research-based, individually adjusted movements, all of the interviewed choreographers say that time is crucial when working with the body.

Bankava: "The hardest thing to explain to everybody is that every bodily thing needs time. More complicated things demand not only time but also regularity for a certain exercise task both during the making and showing process of the performance."¹⁶

Lutce: "There has been a lack of understanding that a certain quality of movement demands time. You can't just say 'You are the sea!' and everybody gets it and turns into the sea. It doesn't work like that. That's exactly what the work consists of - to come up with the necessary conditions for the movement you have imagined to be born in the actors."¹⁷

The choreographers explain that actors need words in different ways. Actors really care about having a conversation explaining why they need to do this or that movement, what it means, etc. However, it is not so easy to distinguish whether actors care about understanding and being talked to, or being convinced verbally to engage in the unknown, in not knowing beforehand how things will get done.

Brīniņa: "In conversations with actors I really focus on being as precise as possible and creating the understanding of 'why' and 'how that specific movement helps'. Though there are situations when questions and explanations are not helpful at all. When

just an exact technical performance is enough, the rest is already there; you just need to trust that the movement tells everything by itself."¹⁸

Lutce: "For actors, the most important thing is to understand why they're doing what they're doing; they need to understand that to the most absurd detail. The word comes first."¹⁹

Jacuka: "Actors need to be addressed, you can't scare them. Many of them become afraid because they think 'there will be dancing!' But instead of dances, I try to understand what is needed for a performance and then search for a solution by adapting to the individuality of every artist, searching for their strong sides, creating enjoyable, understandable, comfortable movement material for them so they don't feel uncomfortable on stage."²⁰

When commenting on differences between actors and dancers, choreographers say that dancers need less explanation, especially before action. Lutce says that for dancers "movement comes first, that's why it's possible to dedicate a lot of time to 'how' and not 'what'".

Grava: "The difference between an actor and dancer is that dancers fully control their bodies. We can experiment and create choreography together. I can give exact feelings,

15 Richard Rohr, from his talk in Riga, July 19, 2018. <https://www.lnb.lv/en/event/lecture-what-kind-spirituality-do-we-need-richard-rohr>

16 Bankava

17 Lutce

18 Brīniņa

19 Lutce

20 Jacuka

sensations, emotions, ideas and tasks, and a dancer can immediately reflect them in the movement.”²¹

Bankava: “Dancers ask little, do a lot and rehearse. They understand through movement, through action. Dancers can search for three hours before asking why, what does it mean, how it will be?”²²

Jacuka: “Dancers don’t need everything to be explained verbally! Sometimes words can confuse a dancer even more. Dancers and choreographers are very able to observe, to catch not only movements but also feelings, atmosphere and small details which, when explained, can sometimes just cause more confusion, more misunderstanding, making beautiful moments become superficial.”²³

Invisible dance meets visible theatre

The first modern dancers in Latvia began performing at the beginning of the 20th century. With the rise of a nationalistic authoritarian regime in the 1930s and subsequent Soviet occupation in 1940, new forms of dance ceased to emerge until the 1990s. Contemporary dance returned to the Latvian cultural scene in the mid-1990s. Its trajectory of development has been strongly linked to the con-

temporary dance study programme established at the Latvian Academy of Culture in 1999. The graduates of this programme form the main voice in the current dance scene in Latvia, and 90% of the choreographers working in Latvia’s theatres are graduates or faculty of the dance programme at the academy.

Over the past decade, the voices in contemporary dance have grown quite diverse and a Latvian contemporary dance scene with its own dynamics exists, although the works it has put on have mostly been of a small scale due to a lack of funding. In fact, it has only been in the past few years that the field of dance in a broader sense has begun to be seen, defined and funded as an art form with different directions, mostly with the introduction of dance as a separate art form in the documents of the Ministry of Culture in 2012 and the establishment of the Latvian Dance Award in 2017.

Between 2011 and 2017, the Performers’ Night (Spēlmaņu nakts – Latvian Theatre Award) devoted an award category to contemporary dance, in addition to a category for ballet. When I was working on the jury of the theatre award for the 2011/2012 season, I wrote a letter to the board of the Latvian Theatre Labour Association requesting that contemporary dance should be included in the awards – or that the ballet award

should be discontinued – because we have two professional dance genres in Latvia. I am grateful that the request was accepted. Until dance received its own Latvian Dance Award in 2019, contemporary dance performances or events were noticed only as part of the celebration of theatre. Always locked together with ballet as a very artificial appendix and sometimes despite it, the contemporary dance still received some thrill of a winner’s speech, collective recognition, a statue and a monetary prize. After the Latvian Dance Award was established, the only dance presence in the theatre awards is the category of Movement Artist of the Year.

Despite the dance field still often being overlooked and lacking permanent infrastructure, the past decade has been good. New voices have entered, strong work is being made, and international visibility is growing. In 2019, the Baltic Dance Platform was established, and Latvian dance began finding its place in European, Asian and American organisations and festivals.

International recognition always enhances local visibility – that is the glory and curse of small countries. A good example is the *Ārā / Out* (2013) dance performance by Olga Žitluhina, Latvia’s best-known contemporary dance choreographer. It was awarded the Ibsen Scholarship of almost 20,000 euros, which is an unprecedented budget for a dance performance. The international success of receiving a grant drew unparalleled media attention. The inspiration for Žitluhina’s

performance – Henrik Ibsen’s play *Brand* – also attracted unmatched attention from theatre critics and researchers. This experience demonstrated that the Latvian theatre scene is fully ready and craves dance theatre productions.

When asked for any additional comments regarding the relationship between dance and theatre, Brīniņa says that it is very important to have good dance performances within public theatres. “OK, it’s alright to call them movement performances,” she corrects herself. Brīniņa argues that contemporary dance and physical theatre performances deserve being in public theatres so that they are not always seen only as an experimental art form, which they are not. The public theatre system is a way to become seen by a wider audience. Institutional theatres could be braver in staging movement performances.

There are brave choices to be made that give more power to a choreographer, but unfortunately it seems that one must be a foreigner to be invited to do such things...or remain behind the director’s back.

In 2011 *Pūt, vējiņi!*, directed by Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, but mostly staged by choreographer Inga Senkāne (ex. Krasovska), was loved by audiences and critics alike. It won three awards at the Performers’ Night, eliciting a deservedly enthusiastic reaction, but this was because at that time the award category for Musical Performance still existed. After 2011, musical and dramatic productions have no more been differentiated.

21 Grava

22 Bankava

23 Jacuka

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In its search to reach deeper layers of reality and speak its own language, contemporary choreography becomes more invisible. The same happens when it is a more integral part of the overall fabric of a theatre performance. To the untrained eye, the work of a choreographer is harder to see.



Marriage (Precības)
Liepāja Theatre

Photo: Ziedonis Safronovs

In 2017, the movement performance of Nikolai Gogol's *Marriage* at the Liepāja Theatre, choreographed by Sergei Zemlyansky from Russia, won seven awards in Performers' Night, including the Grand Prix and Audience award.

These are examples of the need and power of movement-based performances. Both are works of dance theatre. Dance theatre is not something that the current contemporary dance movement is very active in, seeing it as a form of dialogue that is topical today. That also explains why foreign experts, especially those from countries with stronger movement and dance theatre traditions, were less passionate about *Marriage* than local community of theatre critics in Latvia. However, as excitement about theatre language beyond words is huge, I am convinced that much more contemporary and abstract thinking in movement can also enjoy the same amount of success. The continuous work of bringing contemporary choreography into the theatre has the potential to close the gap between how choreography is understood in the Latvian theatre and dance scene. And that is not for the sake of helping the "poor" field of dance, but to give audiences the opportunity to experience a broader spectrum of what contemporary theatre is and what it can do to move beyond verbal language.

The beauty and the curse of invisibility

When asked to tell about some absurd situations that have arisen regarding feedback to her work in theatre, Liene Grava answers that she does not understand why dance is mentioned so little in theatre reviews: "It seems that it got more attention a while ago. There have been several cases in which a choreographer has worked very intensely in the creation of a production and there's really a lot of movement in the performance, and in my opinion it's also successful, but there's nothing said about the choreography. There was a review about *Peter Pan* at the Daile Theatre that was even titled 'Everything is in motion', but the name of the choreographer was not mentioned."^{24, 25}

Lack of knowledge and education in dance matters are the most obvious reasons why the work and role of the choreographer remains outside the focus in theatre reviews and is seen with scepticism by actors and in other contexts. Other reasons for dance, the choreographer and choreography being invisible are more subtle and say a lot about the nature of dance.

Contemporary choreography tries to get rid of surface layers in order to let the movement be seen. The choreographers I talked with try to facilitate a presence of this kind; they work on

²⁴ Grava

²⁵ Atis Rozentāls, "Viss ir kustībā", Diena, September 18, 2014. <https://www.diena.lv/raksts/kd/recenzijas/izrades-piters-pens-recenzija-viss-ir-kustiba-14070420>

channelling movement through each individual, space and time in a way that supports the concept of the performance, and this kind of invisible choreography puts the performance in motion. All five choreographers I talked with said that their work in theatre extends far beyond “making dances”, which is still quite often the expectation and understanding of choreography not only from the point of view of audiences but also from many professionals in the stage arts.

“Making dances” in this context means illustrating music or action or making an entertaining or poetic break in the flow of a performance. In all these cases, the “dances” have a very clear function and through that also meaning. They are ordered according to clear knowledge of what is needed. Russian choreographer Tatiana Gordeeva, however, has formulated a definition that is much more in line with what contemporary choreography is about: “Dance is the refusal of what I know in order to get somewhere else. Dance is the conscious practice of not knowing.”²⁶

Every time I go to see contemporary dance, I am excited and my heart rate increases as if I were preparing to perform myself. I feel like that because in 99% of the cases I have no idea what will happen, how it will be, what parts of my perception will be triggered

(whether intellectual, visceral or emotional), and how much input and interpretation will be asked of me. Not knowing is a reason to get up and go to the show.

Bankava: “When creating dance performances, there’s a lot of empty space that needs to be filled, and the message is born parallel to the creative process. Certainly, this way of creating might seem risky, because very little is known or stable, but at the same time it’s an exciting process and makes me feel as if I’m creating something that has certain value. (..) I always try to give everything possible, but working with the body of another person is a dialogue in which the bodies of both the giver and receiver have to be ready to collaborate.”²⁷

Lutce: “Some actors are very tired, and they know what real theatre is and what it is not. But there are also some actors who still have hope and are ready for challenges. I have zero interest in working with the first kind of actors. You can be part of an amazing, similarly thinking group, but if the people with whom you need to achieve the actual outcome on stage are not interested, then you’re screwed!”²⁸

Jacuka: “In teamwork, the huge burden of responsibility is removed, and that results in better outcomes

regarding my ideas and courage. It’s less scary to take risks if you’re taking risks together”.²⁹

In its search to reach deeper layers of reality and speak its own language, contemporary choreography becomes more invisible. The same happens when it is a more integral part of the overall fabric of a theatre performance. To the untrained eye, the work of a choreographer is harder to see. At the same time, ambition is growing, which can be witnessed in the amount and depth of work put into productions. However, this work often ends up with the choreographers being praised for short “dances” without recognition of their significant participation in the overall process. Choreographers are unfortunately completely forgotten when every second

and breath of a show several hours long is calculated down to the smallest detail. Choreographers are often valued for the result of what they do, and not so valued for their actual work. And they are unseen or even criticised for not doing much about the work they find significant. This clash between choreographers and theatre critics has been going on for at least ten years, and not much has changed.

Lutce: “I read reviews, I wait for reviews. Not only about my own performances but about the arts in general. There are cases when the choreographer is not mentioned at all, and there are cases when the reviewer has gone one step further and you’re at least mentioned in parentheses. For a while, that was the norm for people in my status. I laughed that I’m a person in parentheses. ‘The actors say equally much both in words and body language (choreographer Elina Lutce).’³⁰

“Lack of knowledge and education in dance matters are the most obvious reasons why the work and role of the choreographer remains outside the focus in theatre reviews and is seen with scepticism by actors and in other contexts.

This quote from a review was followed by a long description of Peer Gynt’s body language, but obviously that’s not enough to fill the gaps.”³¹

At the same time, directors value the detailed and in-depth work choreographers do on movement scores and continue to choose contemporary dance choreographers as collaborators. There is at least one good example of a stage director and theatre

26 Marija Saveiko, “Kermenis nevar runāt, jo tas pats ir runa. Intervija ar Tatjanu Gordejevu”, www.dance.lv, April 7, 2020. <https://dance.lv/kermenis-nevar-runat-jo-tas-pats-ir-run-a-intervija-ar-tatjanu-gordejevu/>

27 Bankava

28 Lutce

29 Jacuka

30 Edīte Tišheizere, “Karalvalsts, tā bija te”, *IR*, November 2, 2016, <https://ir.lv/2016/11/02/karalvalsts-ta-bija-te-2/>

31 Lutce



Solo performance
Membra, 2016,
chor. Agate Bankava

Photo: Uldis Bardiņš

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Choreographers find their interest and passion in this work and manage it well, but this invisibility is unfair. Something needs to change after this virus crisis ends.

helping a choreographer to become visible in a very direct sense. A poster for *Salome* at the Latvian National Theatre featured three last names: “Kairiņš / Dzudzilo / Lutce, – Director / Set designers / Choreographer”. The initiative to make the teamwork more visible came from the set designers and was supported by the director, but there were intense discussions with the theatre administration. Lutce says: “That definitely attracted some attention and made people think about the creation of a performance as teamwork. It got me out of the gap and made me an equal creator.”³²

Most of the active and talented choreographers working in Latvian theatre are young women. This raises another issue, and one with a feminist touch. Namely, being a young, female dance artist is not something that is taken very seriously, especially by elderly actors in public theatres. Being female, young, unknown, and perhaps with a soft voice are distinct disadvantages. It is not about criticism of the work but about the person who is doing the work.

Jacuka: “In the field of dance, professionals see and take notice of you already from your first year of studies. In the theatre, on the other hand, I often get asked, ‘Who are you? You’re a young girl, why should I listen to you?’”³³

Brīniņa: “When we worked on *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Latvian National Theatre, 2017), I was so new in theatre, and everybody looked at me with great suspicion and was sure they knew better what to do. When I told actors where to put their hands, they thought it was crazy to think about such details – it doesn’t matter that I have my own internal action going on; I’m working with my character now! After the premiere, a well-known theatre historian asked what it was that Kristine actually did, where’s the choreography? That felt like a knife in the heart. But despite this offensive question, I was happy with the result. I was very satisfied with what we managed to achieve from the point of view of the ensemble’s work. They acted as a united body, and I succeeded in getting the result I was aiming for.”³⁴

Dreaming about the invisible future

“What is the positive post-Covid-19 scenario you are seeing?” the curator and researcher Nastya Proshutinskaya asked after reading a longer version of this article. She got my point as I responded: “Theatre in Latvia that has the money to invite a choreographer is quiet conservative, and the critics writing about such theatre are likewise

³² Lutce

³³ Jacuka

³⁴ Brīniņa

conservative. Choreographers agree to work as invisible service personnel, because there are not many alternatives. They find their interest and passion in this work and manage it well, but this invisibility is unfair. Something needs to change after this virus crisis ends.”

This, therefore, is a good moment to reimagine the future. If theatre continues to change towards a post-dramatic approach, interdisciplinarity, new methods of creation (first trying and then understanding), rejection

happen with “invisible” choreography in the coming decade. Maybe the Covid-19 crisis will slow down the world, support the meaning of the invisible, improve the dialogue between the inside and outside and value function more than form? But what if dance were to become mostly digital? How much of this invisibility can be communicated and sensed in such conditions? Physical distancing will distance people from perceiving the nuances of physicality, especially the physicality of the other. Bankava

“ If theatre continues to change towards a post-dramatic approach, interdisciplinarity, new methods of creation (first trying and then understanding), rejection of macho behaviour by directors and actors and more openness among critics and audiences, things will improve. For all involved sides.

of macho behaviour by directors and actors and more openness among critics and audiences, things will improve. For all involved sides.

Is there hope that the mood of solidarity during the Covid-19 crisis will encourage a more equal sharing of resources with independent choreographers? I also wonder what will

says that choreographers and dance and movement therapists will have a lot of work after the Covid-19 crisis in reteaching people communication, touch and physical closeness. What if the big spaces and funding of public theatres become places for closeness therapy – spaces for being fully human?

KRISTA BURĀNE
Theatre maker, director

***Homo Novus'* Gaze at the World**

Before the beginning

Here are the two words that first come to my mind when I think about the Homo Novus New Theatre Festival: **wild** and **field**. Such is my first sensation of the festival.

Woods. Morning. Darkness fades away; birds hustle and bustle like crazy in the thickets and on the branches of mighty trees; fog rises from the meadows, the air is crisp; my feet are soaked wet with dew; everything is still shrouded in mystery and exudes great joy. So great, that my heart is racing uncontrollably. Because of the beauty, because of some unknown, all-encompassing breath that lets you realise how everything is totally interconnected and how free you can truly be.

A field. Not some sandy barren land, nor a meadow carpeted with wildflowers. The field is full of mile-long furrows. And you realise that there is no other way. The field must be

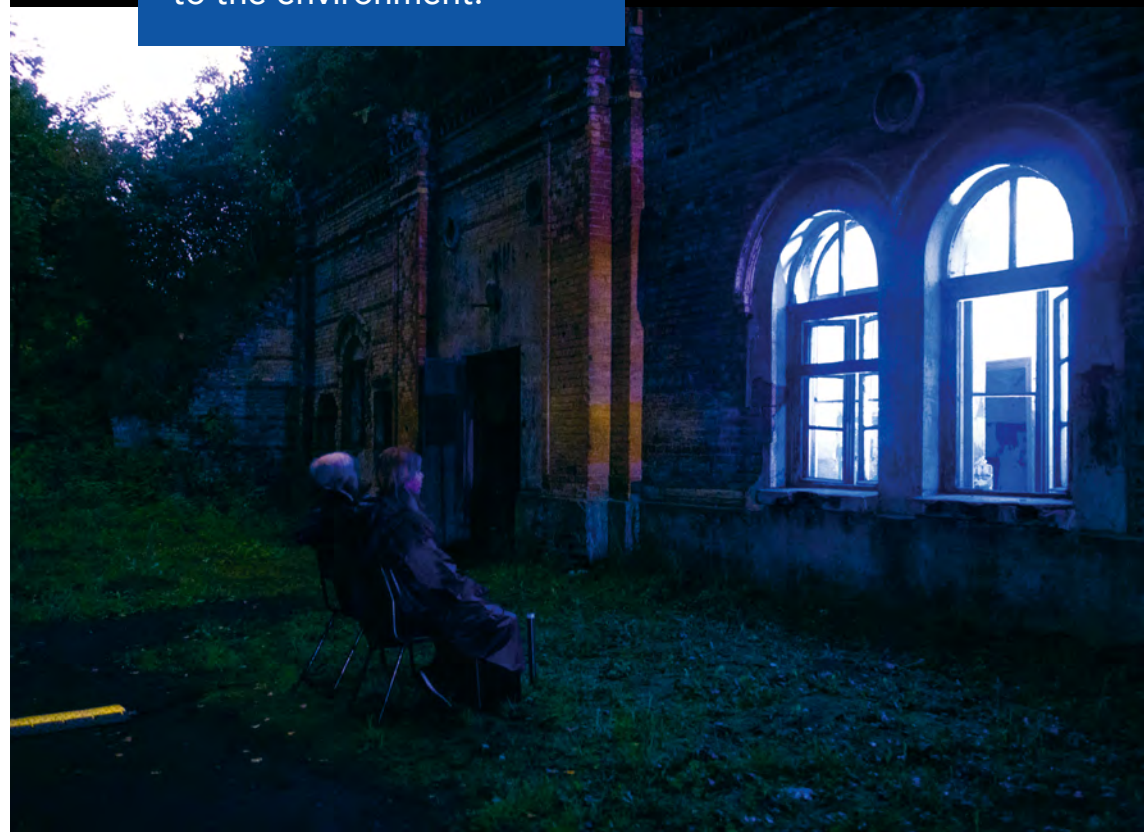
weeded, so that the crop that has been planted can grow and, so to say, accomplish its intended purpose. Only when the weeding is done will you be free to go off and wander in the woods. However, you will have left behind a slightly more orderly piece of the world. There will be something that you will have affected through your work.

This is how I feel about the Homo Novus festival that I love and from which I have learned what it means to be free, what it means to have the self-awareness of being a part of the surrounding world, and how to nurture both of these mindsets. Not only in the theatre, but every day. And I must confess that over the past fifteen years I have looked at the world through the eyes of *homo novus*.

This will be the subject of this article, bearing the title: ***Homo Novus' Gaze at the World***.

“

The festival has always asked questions about how to change our lives so that we can become friendlier to our fellow humans and to the environment.



Fortress (Cietoksnis)

Photo: Raitis Valainis

In my article I will tell my personal story about the New Theatre Festival Homo Novus, which has significantly influenced the field of Latvian contemporary theatre, and my own professional understanding as a *theatre maker* about the nature of contemporary theatre.

Let's go back to the year 2005, when the festival was already ten years old. However, that exact year I had my first intentional experience with the Homo Novus festival. I saw almost all of the performances on the festival's schedule, and I was breathtaken by the diversity of the content and form of contemporary theatre. I was thirty-six years old then, held a degree in philosophy, had ten years' experience of teaching at the University of Latvia, and I was working at an advertising agency – generating ideas, writing texts and supervising artistic aspects of advertising campaigns. After work hours, I was doing some photography and was writing stories. Because of my family, I was acquainted with the theatre arts – mainly in the form of the classical Latvian National Theatre. My father used to work there as an actor.

But that September, my world turned

Upside down.

Thanks to the festival schedule, which can still be found in the archives of the festival,¹ I can even name the exact dates when it happened.

On the 24th of September, 2005, for the first time I became aware of the existence of the Rimini Protokoll theatre company, and I found out that theatre productions could be personal and individual journeys between people in strange and mysterious environments. This company's production of *Cameriga*, and its concern for giving voice to those whose voices usually remain inaudible in the public space, echoes in nearly all of my own performative works. Everyday experts; research of urban environments; creating

narratives that join documentary, currently relevant, authentic features and fantasy, changing the audience from mere anonymous observers into active co-creators of the play; and, above all, an invitation to see and to hear, to perceive and to tune in to life here and now, to the people around us, to the events that affect us. And to take responsibility. To search out and to provide opportunities for the audience to see itself as a capillary of life, as an indispensable part of our shared cardiovascular system.

I can recall the warm darkness out on Valdemāra Street after I saw the play that had just been performed next to the then-vacant building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where Rimini Protokoll had brought in vastly diverse inhabitants of Riga with their strange lives. Afterwards, my friends and I stood out there on the street for a long time, excitedly relating to each other our different individual takes on the play. For the first time I had a physical urge to share with somebody my experience of it; instead of silently and internally reliving the scenes on the stage, to actively tell somebody about the scenes, to think about them, to ask questions, to compare, to argue and to keep on smiling, smiling, smiling... Almost all of the plays that I experienced in the coming years at the Homo Novus festival had the same effect on me. It seems that this is truly one of the main spheres of the festival's influence – to liberate audiences to engage in a lively conversation about their own experience of the arts. To generate willingness to share their adventure.

The following evening, on the 25th of September, I was taken aback by a Johann Le Guillerm and Cirque Ici production titled *Secret*, which was performed in a circus tent erected on the AB Dambis riverside walk in Riga. For the first time in my life, I found out that there was such a thing as contemporary circus and that there were artists whose works and existence proved the reality of fantastic fairy tales. In this performance I was allowed to be a child again – to believe in the unbelievable, to be scared and to laugh simultaneously, to hold my breath in wonder and to love life with abandon because something so beautiful was possible. Since that September evening, in all productions that come to my attention I keep searching for the mystery that is born when an artist's courage, knowledge, mastery, joy of performing and constant self-challenge collide. If there is no such mystery in the performance, there is no performance. My bar is set that high.

Another event worthy of attention when recalling the 2005 festival is *Prove*, the collection of shows created by new Latvian artists. Among others, Andrejs Jarovojš and Mārtiņš Eihe, together with the impressive puppet and object theatre Umka.lv. (now dissolved), presented and created their experimental new works. The starting point for these performances was a question put forth by the director of the festival, Gundega Laiviņa: "Got an idea?" The shows were performed in abandoned factory sheds. The audience meandered from one space to another and, to their amazement, discovered that Latvian theatre can exist without golden portals, movable

¹ The schedule of the 2005 Novus festival is available at <http://www.theatre.lv/hn/index.php?&2>

stages and fancy buffets during the intermissions. It turns out that even in Latvia young artists can work at the intersection between open space, new dramaturgy, media, dance and theatre. As an accidental visitor, I was very glad for such discoveries. So, I decided to continue exploring the venue and started to wander through the abandoned parts of the factory. I did not notice a sizable hole in the floor, fell into it and sprained my ankle. The phrase **"fell into"** very aptly describes my future relationship with the *Homo Novus* festival. Just like many Latvian theatre viewers, I fell in, both literally and figuratively. I fell in love and could not fall out of it. At that time I could not have known that a few years later, because of an unbelievable chain of coincidences, I would participate in the festival myself.

The aforementioned three experiences, in my view, reflect the essence of the *Homo Novus* festival.

First, the festival has always kept an eye on current trends in society and has offered a platform for artists who would like to share their stories about events that are important for the mental wellbeing of humanity. The word **"sharing"** in the context of the festival assumes economic and political connotations. Over the twenty-two years of its existence, the festival has created countless experiences of performances, conversations, master workshops, friendly get-togethers, surprises and serious thought-provoking moments, during which "sharing" has become a well-recognised and important practice of human coexistence. The festival has always asked questions about

how to change our lives so that we can become friendlier to our fellow humans and to the environment. In this respect, the festival has openly expressed its political stance and has encouraged artists to use their public voice to influence social processes. I believe nobody would question the fact that a generation of Latvian artists interested in creating socially engaging works of art (and I presume to count myself among them) have developed their own specific characteristics as a result of the following facts:

1) We have had the opportunity to get to know the work of such artists as Milo Rau, Dries Verhoeven, Walid Raad, Romeo Castellucci, Rabih Mroué, Kornél Mundruczó, Philippe Quesne, Forced Entertainment, Kristian Smeds, Gob Squad, Vacuum Cleaner and others. Their courage to not avert their eyes from the scars on the face of the contemporary world inspires us to create theatre that tells the story of Latvia's traumatic experiences, with the aim to offer possible solutions for healing.

2) The festival has actively promoted the production of new works by young Latvian artists, thus becoming a stage that supports the search for content and form that are suitable for our contemporary age and lets artists position their works in the context of currently relevant world events.

Second, *Homo Novus* has always taken care to bring artistically challenging, high-quality, unconventional works of art to Latvia. One must not

fail to mention the special vision of the former director of the festival, Gundega Laiviņa. In my opinion, her main contribution was her ability to perceive and shape an entire festival as a unified piece of art in which each event contributes, continues and highlights the other events. In a way, the festival was created as a utopian space where all artists and audiences become aware of their extraordinary interconnectedness, their personal responsibility and, at the same time, their personal freedom. The word **"utopia"** in this case also touches upon a state of battle. Year after year, the festival's creative team has been challenging the ingrained or, one could even say, unbreakable perception in Latvian society that theatre is a specific building rather than a process. The dominant system of the state-sponsored repertory theatres with their full-time employees and directors keeps producing a specific type of professionals and audiences, who perceive theatre in its classic interpretation, tolerating some deviance as to what gets presented on stage only when it corresponds with the styles of the select theatre directors or managers involved.

Homo Novus, on the contrary, consistently utilises the urban environment as a stage, casting plays into the context of everyday life, this revealing new facets in space and time that we

share with each other on a daily basis. Accompanied by works of art, daily life becomes a bit easier to live, because life itself turns out to be a never-ending creative process. Life opens spaces and the boundaries of our existence and reveals the infinite possibilities hidden within them. Including the joy of life that resides in the realm of boundlessness.

Third, at the centre of the festival is a youthfully minded person. This means questioning, wondering, discovering, frolicking, breaking boundaries, taking risks. The festival has been a significant education and launch pad not only for a large segment of middle- and young-generation Latvian artists but also for those whose works over the past twenty years have already become a part of the history of world theatre. I don't belong to the latter group, but I have had the privilege of learning from them.

When recounting my life and the theatre schooling that I have received from this festival, I must return to the year 2008, when the festival was conducted in a *petite* version, named *Homo Alibi*.² The subject of this festival was puppets and objects. Latvian artists were invited to put on shows for children, because "the goal of the festival organisers was to shake up the stiff environment of the theatre addressed to youth and children".³ And they succeeded! At that time it was

2 At the time, the New Theatre Institute of Latvia used to hold the *Homo Novus* festival biennially. In the gap years it produced smaller-scale festivals dedicated to particular themes.

3 "The *Homo Alibi* 2008 puppet and object theatre festival". <https://www.tvnet.lv/4827992/lellu-un-objektu-teatra-festivals--alibi-2008>



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I believe that it is essential to work with uncomfortable subjects and within uncomfortable locations. To be in situations that frighten me, situations that I do not understand and that I would like to change.

Boundaries (Robežas)

Photo: Raitis Valainis

a rare exception in Latvia to see a theatre production for children in which the artist interacted with the audience as rational people. Now, looking back at the whole progression of theatre processes, I am certain that it was precisely *Homo Alibi* 2008 that in a way served as a catalyst for the boom of high-quality Latvian theatre productions for children and youth.

I participated in *Homo Alibi* 2008 as the playwright for director Mārtiņš Eihe's object theatre production entitled *Little Person*. This was one of our first collaborative productions for children and youth – as a project of the Nomadi creative association, founded in 2007.

Being aware of the necessity to continue the trend of offering contemporary productions for children and youth audiences, as initiated by the New Theatre Institute, we started to produce a theatre festival for children and youth, called *NoMadI*. It was based on principles similar to *Homo Novus*. Through *NoMadI*, we brought to Latvia theatre plays as well as produced plays of our own that addressed issues that are important to and trending among children. We proved that children's and youth theatre can exist outside the space of classical theatre. Most importantly, we opened up a discussion about whether there are any taboo topics in art designed for children and youth. As strange as it may sound now, a mere decade ago many theatre artists in Latvia believed that one cannot and should not talk with children about life as it is in reality.

Within the context of my own personal history, I believe that the *NoMadI*

festival (which took place four times, from 2011 to 2014) was one of the most socially significant projects produced by the Nomadi creative association. We provided a platform for fledgling independent theatres and artists who sought to address the youngest members of Latvian society. More than that, we intentionally focused on introducing them to all the regions of Latvia, showing the main programme of the festival in such cities as Liepāja and Valmiera instead of the capital, Riga. At that time our festival was the only platform for contemporary theatre in rural areas of Latvia. It acquainted new audiences with various forms of theatre: documentary, environmental, physical theatre, object theatre, participatory theatre, audio theatre, new circus and the like. Such forms of theatre did not have a place on the traditional stages in Latvia.

For several years now, the Valmiera Summer Theatre Festival, under the guidance of Jānis Znotiņš and Reinis Suhanovs, has picked up the *NoMadI* baton with fresh vitality and new ideas. Every second year this festival fosters the creation of original contemporary theatre plays for children and youth. I am glad to see that more and more young theatre directors are ready to create solid shows for the youngest audiences, and, in doing so, they are assuming responsibility for the society in which they live.

There! The word **responsibility**. It is precisely within the context of responsibility that one should examine the other works that I have authored or

co-authored. Directly or indirectly, all of them are connected with the history of the *Homo Novus* festival and with the adoption of theatre forms that were formerly uncommon in Latvia.

Personally, I believe that it is essential to work with uncomfortable subjects and within uncomfortable locations. To be in situations that frighten me, situations that I do not understand and that I would like to change. To turn alienated, hostile, dull relationships into personally engaging adventures based on trust. I like to create the contact opportunities where strangers can meet, where they can discover something in common. I like to work in large-scale locations in order to find in them both space and time for an intimate experience. And I like to challenge the audience. Most likely it is because I myself, when sitting in the audience, want to actively engage with the artist.

I believe it is important to turn a piece of art into a dynamic, action-filled experience that allows one not only to observe but also to express trust, respect, freedom and creativity. I believe that these are the most important forms of human existence both for an individual as well as for society.

The idea that an audience member can be a participant in a theatre play or any other work of art is almost a hundred years old and saturated with various critical aspects. This history

embodies sometimes mutually exclusive perspectives on activations and the relationship of authorship and society during the creation and duration of the play. However, nobody denies that participatory art happenings are essentially connected with social turn. For example, installations and interactive art tend to focus on the activation of an individual viewer within the framework of his or her interaction with the specific work of art. On the contrary, participative works of art emphasise the collective dimension of the social experience.⁴ Creation of this kind of experience has been the basis for many of my theatre productions and performative happenings.

Let me mention a few of them (videos and photos can be accessed in the archive on my website, kristaburane.com):⁵

1. *Stories of the Grey Pavement* (2010, International Festival of Contemporary Art *Survival Kit*).
2. *Road Maps* (2014, a day-long show in the meat pavilion at Riga Central Market to celebrate the inauguration of Riga as the European Capital of Culture, produced by the New Theatre Institute of Latvia).
3. *Boundaries* (2016, in the town of Cēsis and the Purvciems suburb of Riga, produced by the DOTS Foundation for an Open Society).

4. *Fortress* (2017, at Daugavgrīva Fortress, produced by the *Homo Novus* festival and the British Council).
5. *Nocturne*, co-created by Andy Field (2018, in the Ķengarags suburb of Riga, produced by the *Homo Novus* festival).

Alongside these productions, I would also like to mention *The Reading Room* by Mārtiņš Eihe (2015, produced by the *Homo Novus* festival), of which I was a co-author and one of the performers.

All of the above-mentioned works share several common traits:

The substantive basis for the play's dramaturgy is a documentary story about the real experiences of real people that happened or are happening around us here and now.

The audience becomes acquainted with these stories through a performance by the authors themselves, not actors. It is important to note, that these stories maximally preserve the narrator's genuine manner of expression. The authors choose a mode of expression that is most suitable for themselves. Instead of becoming acquainted with an actor, the audience gets to know a person who is brave enough to entrust his or her personal story to strangers. (In this case, even the author's self-image retains traces of authenticity.)

The authors, or so-called "every-day experts", represent a specific social group in a given location or circumstances, such as residents of Birznieka Upīša Street, workers in the meat pavilion at Riga Central Market, people who write diaries or advocate for Ķengarags' wildlife, inhabitants of the town of Cēsis, residents of Bolderāja, Daugavgrīva or the "Wall of China" in Purvciems.⁶ Although the authors have been shaped by their distinct social circumstances, they bear witness to our society as a whole. The audience is given the opportunity to meet people whom they would most likely ignore or not notice in their normal daily interactions, to listen to their stories and to talk with them. By doing so, on the one hand, the audience can get in touch with parallel realities as well as realise the parallel or conditional nature of their own reality. On the other hand, the audience can experience the merging of such realities into a sense of a larger existential community.

The audience meets the author of the story in a close-up, face-to-face manner, although the level of their interaction may vary. This allows the members of the audience to become active participants in the situation rather than remain merely passive viewers. The manner in which an author

4 Bishop, C., "Introduction//Viewers as Producers", *Participation*. Ed. by Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 11.

5 Videos and photos of the productions can be accessed in the archive on my website, www.kristaburane.com

6 Bolderāja and Daugavgrīva are two of Riga's suburbs. The "Wall of China" in the Purvciems suburb is a very large cluster of nine-storey-tall apartment buildings.

narrates his or her own story depends greatly on the reactions of the audience members – what they do, how they listen, how they behave. The attitude of the audience members determines whether the author of the story will choose to speak to them at all.

The show takes place in documentary settings that play a part in the daily life of the story's author or that bear witness to the subject of the story. The contrast between the size of an individual person and the size of the massive contextual surroundings (such as the meat pavilion at Riga Central Market, the huge nine-storey apartment buildings, Daugavgrīva Fortress, or a section of the Ķengarags suburb) plays a significant role in these productions.

The trajectories and forms of the audience's movement within the given documentary setting become a significant part of the dramaturgy of the show. The movement of the audience is a means to construct the situation and perception of the show. Changes in the trajectory of the movement, barriers to the movement and the duration of the movement are intentionally set in order to change the audience's perception of what is visible and to draw them closer to what is invisible.

The show can never be experienced in its totality because the structure, framework and variations of the show far outweigh what a single person can physically access in a single show. A fully comprehensive experience would not be possible even if one were to attend every single performance.

All the above-mentioned aspects challenge the viewers to re-evaluate their perceptions of the nature and tasks of theatre and what it means to be an audience member. At the same time, they raise questions about the nature of the society we live in, the rules of societal existence, what it means to be a part of society. They bring us into connection with other, unfamiliar and formerly unknown parts of society. The article that you are currently reading, and that will soon come to an end, is entitled "*Homo Novus Gaze at the World*". I believe that during a theatre show it is important for the members of the audience to sense how the world is gazing back at them.

When creating documentary participatory theatre performances, I strive to foster maximally equal relationships between all participants of the show – the authors as well as the people who have come to meet the authors. In a way, the goal of such performances is to remove from the audience the attitude that I would define as "consumer glasses", which tends to perceive the performance as a product for sale and the artist as a service provider,

and which casts a shadow that compels the administrative and creative team to view their own work from a sales perspective. When the consumer relationship dominates, even socially crucial theatre productions tend to lose their impact, because,

essentially, the audience member and the artist re-enact society's hierarchical power structures, even if the subject of the show seeks to invite viewers to question such power structures.

The political aspects of the theatre plays that I have mentioned here are reflected not only in their subject matter but also in the relationships that are formed between all the participants of the production and in the

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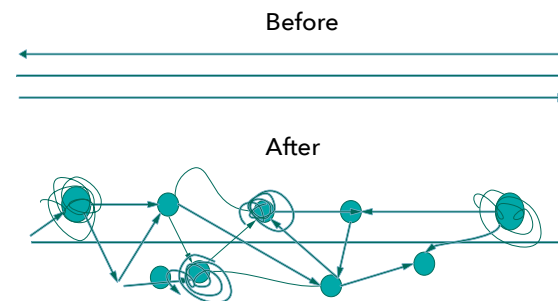
When creating documentary participatory theatre performances, I strive to foster maximally equal relationships between all participants of the show – the authors as well as the people who have come to meet the authors.

changes brought by the altered trajectory of the gaze that happens to the place that the show inhabits. In the place that all of us share. The place that is our common home.

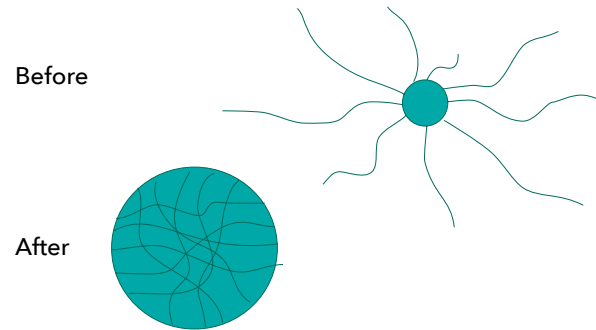
In conclusion, let me offer some naïve illustrations of BEFORE and AFTER. I get that

reading descriptions of theatre plays may be rather boring, and writing about my own theatre productions feels rather strange. Therefore, the following sketches are perhaps just the right solution to let my readers open the gaze of their imagination and to envision what happened at some of the plays I have mentioned. The gaze through which the *homo novus* looks at the world.

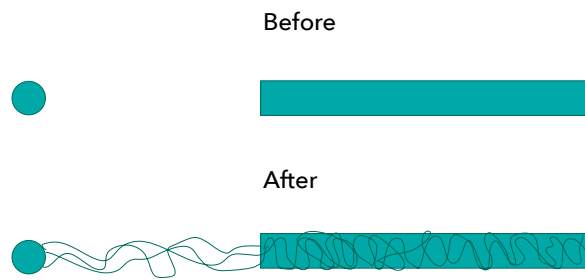
Stories of the Grey Pavement (2010)



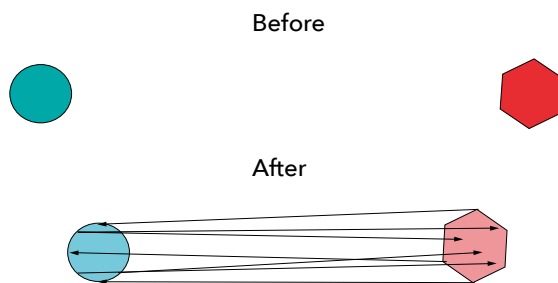
Road Maps (2014)



Boundaries (2017)



Fortress (2018)



EDGARAS KLIVIS

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Difference and Repetition in Classical National Drama in Latvian and Lithuanian Theatre

One of the clichés of theatre criticism dealing with new stagings of plays that have the status of national classics is “return”. It paints a picture of prodigal theatre producers and their audiences who eventually decide to stop nomadising around in different directions and perspectives and return to the classics with a sense of guilt and a need for consecration. A less Christian reading of this cliché offers us “an eternal return” in the form of a cycle, as the classic play itself tends to return over and over in order to (re)assemble the dissipated bodies (of the nation) and their parts into a configuration that has already existed before, which means that heroes and enemies, characters and landscapes, words and actions will inevitably fall into the same combinations that have already been drafted in the major national epics and plays.

But what if we think about this eternal return of national classics in a more Deleuzian sense, as a joyful (rather than guilty or intimidating) affirmation of difference-in-itself? There is a difference, says Deleuze, between a generality, law, resemblance (of, say, a national myth or national culture that exists as a general structure, model and cycle) and *repetition* or return, since repetition (in his own particular meaning) is rather a miracle, while a return is a way that something different and unique can come into being. The leaves of a tree are shaped by biological laws, however, shouldn't we also consider another, deeper reality, which makes every single leaf of every tree unique?



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There are stagings of classical national drama in both Lithuanian and Latvian theatres that can be described as a disaffirmation of change and alternation and that sacrifice the intensity of ongoing transformation for the celebration of mythological presence.

Blow, the Wind! (Pūt, vējiņi!)
Latvian National Theatre

Photo: Kristaps Kalns

If repetition can be found, even in nature, it is in the name of a power which affirms itself against the law, which works underneath laws, perhaps superior to laws. If repetition exists, it expresses at once a singularity opposed to the general, a universality opposed to the particular, a distinctive opposed to the ordinary, an instantaneity opposed to variation and an eternity opposed to permanence. In every respect, repetition is a transgression. It puts law into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality.¹

So it is possible to ask if the production of a classic play seeks generality (a general structure, historical cycle and resemblance between two different historical situations and societies, a kind of historical exchange, a substitution) or repetition in a Deleuzian sense – a repetition of difference, or a return of difference (of reflections, echoes, doubles and souls). What interests me here is whether the producers of the classic play submit to the demands to return contemporary society with all of its deviations, ramifications, divergences, breaches and inconsistencies back to a general myth, origin, community and historical cycle or – on the contrary – do they aim for the return of difference and the creation of something unique, thus offering audiences new social formations and shapes?

By the way, the eternal return of difference does not mean a rejection of history or some kind of neoliberal loss of memory, including all attachments and loyalties. On the contrary, it is an affirmative acknowledgment of historical becoming when a performance of a classic play is not a celebration of mythological burden but instead an intense experience of continual transformation. After all, the laws of nature, seasons and cycles, as well as the laws of organicist mythologies, are not historical; instead, they are a denial of being in history.

Consequently, it is not just about “re-dressing” classic characters, but making real choices, which for Deleuze includes selection, will and freedom, resulting in new perceptual orders and new lumps of reality. Because re-dressing is actually a denial of history; it is based on the cliché of the return in the sense that “the garments change, but the essence remains the same”. It is a heavy return, falling on the shoulders of contemporary people.

There are stagings of classical national drama in both Lithuanian and Latvian theatres that can be described as a disaffirmation of change and alternation and that sacrifice the intensity of ongoing transformation for the celebration of mythological presence. For example, the performance of *Barbora* staged in 2015 by the Lithuanian director Jonas Jurašas, which invited the audience to return not just to the original play by Juozas

Grušas about the 16th-century historical figure Barbora Radvilaitė, symbolising noble patriotic love, but also the performance Jurašas made in 1972 (based on the same play), which was mutilated by Soviet censorship and eventually renounced by the director himself (and which also served as one of the reasons for his emigration to the West a few years later). This most recent performance reinterprets the play and features the legendary Lithuanian actress who played the role of Barbora Radvilaitė in the Soviet-era production and thus retells the story from her point of view. Eventually, however, as theatre researcher Jurgita Staniškytė points out, this triple historical linkup “asserts an attitude that the distance of time changed very little”, because the 2015 performance functioned as a consecration of theatrical elements into “a space of legend”, which is consistent with patterns of mythology.²

Another example from Lithuanian theatre is the choice by Oskaras Koršunovas to stage a play by another important Soviet playwright, Justinas Marcinkevičius, namely, the historical play *Cathedral* (Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, 2012) – again an attempt to return to general and permanent moral laws, as if the audience in the theatre were still the same

Soviet intelligentsia. Or, to be more precise, as if they were always the same cyclic community.

We should remember that what can be considered the legitimization of national theatre includes more than just stasis of canon and weight of traditions and mythologies communicated through the chain of generations. First, the mythological repertoire of heroes and symbols accepted as national identity markers (as generalities and laws) are still a result of choice and invention, creativity and contingency, so that, at least in theory, there is a distant moment of voluntary heterogeneous creativity somewhere at the source of every nationalist culture canon, which has been constructed through the private creativity of random people (such as Rainis, or Jānis Pliekšāns [1865–1929], in Latvia) as well as public considerations in

“ We should remember that what can be considered the legitimization of national theatre includes more than just stasis of canon and weight of traditions and mythologies communicated through the chain of generations.

the early public sphere. This means that, at the historical moment of creative considerations, national culture

1 Deleuze, G. *Difference and Repetition* (Columbia University Press, 1994), 3.

2 Staniškytė, J. “Praeitis ir jos liudininkai”, *Lietuvos teatras: metraštis*, <http://lteatras.lt/lt/2014-2015/spektakliai/164-praeitis-ir-jos-liudininkai>

faced the realm of plurality and the canon (those petrified images that all schoolchildren have to suffer through) was once a chaotic witch's cauldron in which the originators of national representations (traditions, history, language, folklore) could throw in whatever they fancied.

For example, in 1973, American-based Latvian literature and theatre researcher Juris Silenieks compared two artists – Rainis and Aimé Césaire, an Afro-Caribbean surrealist – and their views of nationalism as a platform to resist colonialism, racism and imperialism (colonial slavery in the Caribbean and feudal serfdom in the Baltic region) but not as an end in itself, for the eventual aim of both poets was universal humanity and internationalism.³ But there is also something else. Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1939) is exactly the case of a return (and the African identity in the colonies) as an act of difference, invention and freedom with all the striking neologisms, involving us in a "poetics of cultural invention".⁴ If this could also be said of Rainis, shouldn't the stagings of (or the returns to) Rainis' plays be, first of all, faithful to his inventiveness, his creative plurality, his affirmation of selection and freedom instead of the laws and myth supposedly functioning in his works?

I see this contradiction between the national-mythological structures, cycles or laws that work as a generality reflected in the particulars – the plays of national classics and their stage productions and, on the other hand, a different reality with no general laws but with singular unique events related in amorous, echoing repetitions – as effective in analysing theatre productions of national classics. And, when comparing the three Baltic theatres, the best example of these differences are the plays and stage interpretations of Rainis. A number of productions based on the texts by this poet and main figure of Latvian national culture – including *Rainis' Dreams* staged by Russian stage director Kirill Serebrennikov at the Latvian National Theatre in 2015, the recent production by Elmārs Seņkovs of *Blow, the Wind!* at the same theatre, the production by Viesturs Kairiņš of *Fire and Night*, the opera by Imants Kalniņš and Imants Ziedonis based on Rainis' play *I played, I danced* directed by Laura Groza-Ķibere in 2019, and a number of earlier productions, such as the *Fire and Night* opera by Jānis Medīņš, directed by Alvis Hermanis in 1995 as well as the legendary production by Eduards Smiļģis in 1947 – give us a stunning scope and perspective for understanding the significance and reasons behind the "return" of national dramaturgy.

3 Silenieks, J. "Nationalism and the Promethean Mission: Profiles of Two Poets, Rainis and Césaire", *Problems of Mininations: Baltic Perspectives*, eds. Arvids Ziedonis Jr., Rein Taagepera, Mardi Valgemäe (San Jose: California State University, 1973), 57–63.

4 Clifford, J. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 176.

The way Kairiņš constructed *Fire and Night* (Latvian National Theatre, 2015) as a montage of light illuminating the guilty internal lives of chambermaids and their bourgeois masters leaves no opportunities for the audience to get immersed in any common, general myth of origin. On the contrary, I presume (because I only saw a recording of the performance) it multiplies the possibilities of readings – from Freudian parodies to Wagnerian fantasies and further to Lewis Carroll and yet other images that gave birth to both nationalism and hysteria. At this point, the performance is (paradoxically!) a loyal staging of Rainis, because, like Rainis in the early 20th century, Kairiņš' performance invents and offers new shapes for the audience's experiences. Hence the link between these creations, these works of art, is not in service of something else, a bigger order or a national existence, but an echo and a reflection thereof.

As is often the case with stagings of opera based on national drama, different elements in the opera production of *I played, I danced* directed by Laura Groza-Ķibere work in different modes, because the music and the performance of the opera singers remain almost neutral to the visual concept of the director and the stage designer. In this production, stage designer Miķelis Fišers and costume designer Kristīne Pasternaka successfully alternate the modes of perception and the sense of the spectators – they are thus not just the national community celebrating the myth of the Latvian Orpheus and their community with the dead, with past generations; they

are also offered the opportunity to establish an ironic distance towards the anthropology of the Latvian wedding in the first act, or become involved in more political reflection as a group of employees of the Latvian Museum of National History enter the stage at the end of Act 1.

On the contrary, it seems to me that in his production of *Blow, the Wind!* Seņkovs offers viewers national culture as a stable identity of changeless order as the crowd of performers dressed in stylised national costumes fills the whole stage, moving in a synchronised manner and regrouping in horizontal and vertical lines. What comes to mind when watching this performance are the numerous examples of the permanent patterns that symbolise the timeless existence of a nation: the supposedly ancient geometric framework of folk dances, the codes and designs woven into the Lielvārde belt (*Lielvārdes josta*) and other images that we associate with the Latvian nation. And this effective disciplinary picture eventually dominates the whole performance to the degree that even the characters in Rainis' play become hard to identify as they come out from this general order only to return and dissolve into it. This was especially noticeable due to the fact that, having no direct translation, I could focus more on the plastic and visual aspects of the production, which resulted in the sense that the characters emerged from the eternal community to say their text and then returned – but the experience could be different for the Latvian audience.



So, one possible reading of the production of *Blow, the Wind!* with its almost perfect geometrical *Gesamtkunstwerk* is that it presents the fantasy of a lost or broken community that has to be reconstituted. A community that is an alternative to society (which is just an association and division of forces and needs⁵), where every member participates directly in the production and maintenance of an organic and shared identity through intimate communication (in this case, represented via synchronised movements).

Is there still another possible read-

ing of this performance, one that also reveals something else, namely, references to the history of interpreting Rainis and the national tradition, including, for example, the aesthetics of the national song festivals? I think the director reserved the possibility to retain both readings: the myth and the history, the community and the images that this community has historically produced of itself. It is characteristic that the performance started with the appearance of actors Ģirts Jakovļevs and Esmeralda Ermale, who played the leading roles in the film adaptation of the same play by Gunārs Piesis (1973).

5 Nancy, J. L. *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 5.

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Like many other post-communist societies, Baltic societies share a belief in the almost magical power of national identity and belonging to a national community.

However, I had the feeling that, in spite of this double game that the audience is offered, the tradition, or immutable origin, still puts its burden on the shoulders of the contemporary audience even if it evokes a smile – in the end, it does not offer anything new or provoke any new social formations, roles or shapes. The nostalgic smile does not bring about an opportunity to transform oneself, to experience new formations or to invent new forms of community. The dominant visual modes and ornament patterns that symbolise the unchang-

ing essence of the Latvian nation ultimately become a solemn, almost ritualistic atmosphere (and this was

felt quite well in the audience).

Because the Lithuanian national drama tradition does not have such a figure as Rainis, whose staging would so definitely reveal the development of national dramaturgy in theatre, the similar tendencies in Lithuanian theatre are more fragmentary. Apart from the above-mentioned productions by Jurašas and Koršunovas based on plays that represented Soviet national culture, one should point out one of the last performances by Eimuntas Nekrošius, which was staged at the National Theatre in Warsaw in 2016

and based on *Forefathers' Eve*, a literary piece by the 19th-century Polish-speaking Lithuanian poet Adamas Mickevičius (Adam Mickiewicz) and a paradigmatic work for both Poles and Lithuanians. This performance is an interesting example of how the perception of the significance of a text can be different for the director and for the actors, because the rather conservative Polish tradition of staging Mickevičius (which is old, broad and profound) was much more important for the actors than for the director from Lithuania, where this play is staged quite rarely. So, due to their attachment to the tradition, which highlights the mythological roots of the play, the actors were loath to submit to the playfulness of Nekrošius' imagination and to the joyful singularity of his readings of classic plays that correspond to Deleuzian affirmation. As a result, the performance pulled in different directions at the same time and was eventually not that successful.

Another recent Lithuanian example, which is not directly a staging of a classic national drama but still relates to the representation of Lithuanian identity, is *Lokis*, staged by Polish director Łukasz Twarkowski. The literary predecessor of the performance (although it involves a variety of material and narratives) is the homonymous novella by the French writer Prosper Mérimée written in the mid-19th century and narrating the Lithuanian version of Dracula, wherein the Lithua-

nian count turns into a bear. The story by Mérimée has been staged before, for example, as an opera by Bronius Kutavičius, directed by Jonas Jurašas. However, in the intermedial postdramatic performance by Twarkowski the narrative of the human-bear is just an echo, a repetition to bring about something different and unique, opening up an infinity of interpretational freedoms.

Like many other post-communist societies, Baltic societies share a belief in the almost magical power of national identity and belonging to a national community. Productions of national classics, especially on the prestigious stages of national drama or opera theatres, are traditionally perceived as portrayals of this sense of belonging, as performances of identity, as nation building, as an apparatus for an imagined community or as "theatrical nationhood".⁶ At the same time, this function is severely attacked as hopelessly outdated xenophobia, a suffocating regime of reproductive heteronormativity,⁷ etc. Moreover, the moral and mythological laws and general structures that stagings of national dramaturgy often seek to "return" to open up a number of political questions, such as who has access to the means of production of the national imaginary and the authorisation to perform the traditional representations of identity? And who is left behind and forced to obediently accept

the canon even if it goes against their own values and knowledge?

If every national tradition (including theatre traditions) has at some point been invented, then each staging of classical national drama itself bears this genetic mark of creativity on its own and involves at least some degree (at least secondary or interpretive) of freedom, choice and reinven-

tion both in terms of production and in terms of perception. Can this dynamism then be treated as a combination of homogeneous community and heterogeneous society, comprising two stages of the same circle in which national society reinvents its own canonic self-representation through free artistic creativity? There is some plurality that even the most ardent nationalists accept.

6 Kruger, L. *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

7 Spivak, G. C. *Nationalism and the Imagination* (Seagull Books, 2015).

The Multifunctionalism of Contemporary Theatre in Latvia: a Few Examples

An Outsider's View

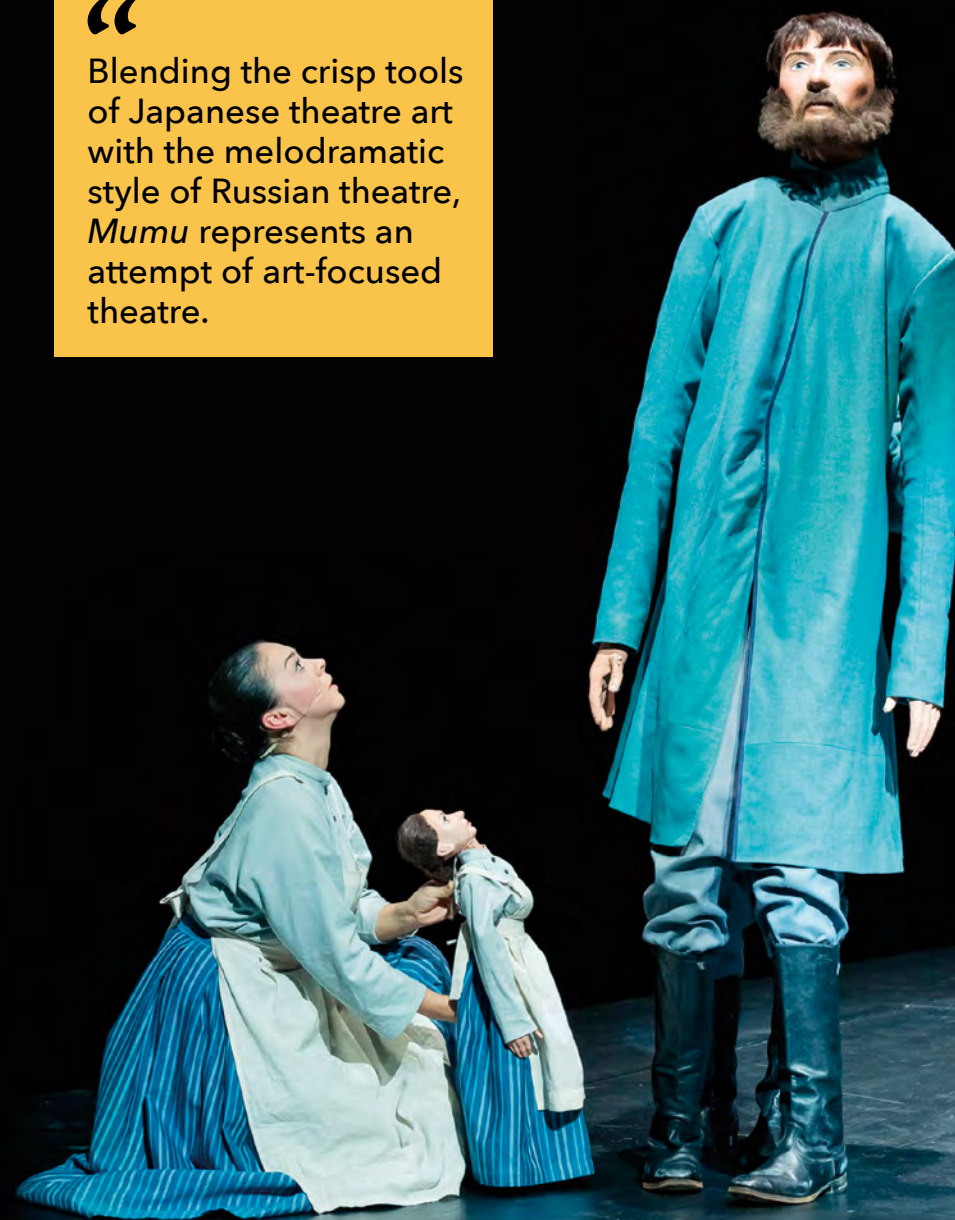
This article is inspired by the showcase of Latvian theatre productions organised in early November 2019 in Riga by the Latvian Theatre Labour Association to introduce the nominees of the *Spēlmaņu Nakts* (Performers' Night) theatre award for the 2018/2019 Latvian theatre season. This week gave me an excellent opportunity to compare the state of Estonian theatre with the best of Latvian theatre, and I can confirm that my trip had a reassuring effect. The Latvian theatre scene also seems to be rather quiet at the moment, especially when it comes to art-focused theatre, and that is why – according to the experts – the nominees included some performances that pulled their weight not so much in terms of art but by providing some other type of cultural favour. When it is done well, theatre that is not intentionally focused on art can be as great as theatre that sets artistic tasks and tries to solve them.

The cultural favours of theatre

The theatre critic's first job is to identify the type of non-art-related value a performance is offering (even if it does not coincide with the intentions advertised in the marketing campaign) and not get discouraged when, instead of an art-focused performance, he or she is faced with, for example, a theatricalised history lecture. Lectures performed in the spirit of a "people's university" on the history of a certain place, people or culture are completely acceptable and a wonderful public service offered by theatre. At the Latvian Performers' Night showcase, this genre was presented in a stylistically clean way by an independent documentary production about the Latvian literary classic Zenta Mauriņa, namely, *Zenta Mauriņa: Documentary Dreams* (*Zenta Mauriņa. Dokumentālie sapņi*, dir. by Kristīne Krūze-Hermāne, 2019).

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Blending the crisp tools of Japanese theatre art with the melodramatic style of Russian theatre, *Mumu* represents an attempt of art-focused theatre.



Mumu
Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre

Photo: Inese Kalniņa

Nowadays, people do not have as much time to read fiction as they did in the past, so theatres are left with the important role of keeping up people's reading habits: performances that stay true to an original text offer as a bonus the service of a shared public reading. In a few hours, one can obtain a full dose of a drama text or excerpts of fiction or poetry, all of it without much effort; also, readers no longer have to make the sometimes painful act of choosing a piece of literature, because theatre does it for them. I am happy to pay for such a service.

However, because the word "service" has a judgmental, derogatory and debasing connotation, I am going to replace it with the word "favour", just to make the text more acceptable from this point onwards. One should be well dressed when talking about theatre; the elevated expressiveness of a theatre review is part of theatre culture itself. Hence, theatre offers many favours to society, of which setting an aesthetic task or solving existing ones in a new manner is only one service out of many and statistically rare at that.

Theatre's favour of keeping up the reading habit carries an additional value due to its collective nature. For already a few decades, we have had to listen to justified complaints about the fragmentation of the cultural experience and about the lack of readers – in the good old sense of the word – united by core texts. The performance experience should lessen the anxiety about the fragmented cultural field. The accompanying top roles created by actors only uphold this effect

of the theatre. The favour of shared reading was provided by the Valmiera Drama Theatre's production of *Hamlet* (dir. by Indra Roga, 2019) and, as a more modern example, by Dirty Deal Teatro's performance *Based on a Book* (*Pēc grāmatas motīviem*, dir. by Viesturs Sīlis, 2019), which refers to the Austrian author Thomas Bernhard.

Apart from the already mentioned elements, theatre also carries the function of national identity formation (whether by building it or by poking fun at it). An example of this is the Latvian National Theatre's performance *Blow, the Wind!* (*Pūt, vējiņi!* dir. by Elmārs Seņkovs, 2018), which is dedicated to the centenary of the Latvian state and refers conceptually to the Latvian Song and Dance Festival. In fact, in terms of form, it is a grand reproduction of a song festival in a theatre hall. On the idea level, the production seems a bit grotesque due to the fact that the folk song *Blow, Wind!*, or *Pūgō, tūlō*, which provided the performance with its title, originally belonged to the Livonians, who speak a nearly extinct Finno-Ugric language and have been largely assimilated by Latvians and Estonians. Baltic people should once and for all sort out the *Livocide* topic. On the other hand, it was Rainis, the canonical Latvian classical poet and playwright, who linked this Livonian song to Latvian drama, and this issue has never been questioned.

Art theatre was represented at the showcase by the Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre's *Mumu* (dir. by Viesturs Kairišs, 2018), which tried

to blend the crisp tools of Japanese theatre art with the melodramatic style of Russian theatre. Here one could detect an aesthetic ambition that the direction did not reach. An intriguing expressive form had been created, but it looked as if the director had allowed himself to enjoy the form for too long: the outcome was geeky, too tightly tied to the newly discovered rules of the game.

And to contradict myself for the sake of developing this thought even further, I have to admit that a production analysis should look at the favour level and at the aesthetics level at the same time. One should not rule out the other; the analysis levels should complement and enrich each other. This does not mean that all levels always exist in all productions. And not all aesthetic events are intentional; even a master creator might not be aware of all of them during the process of creation. The same might apply to social favours, which can get added during the reception phase.

Publicist-style theatre

Alvis Hermanis' *History Research Commission* (*Vēstures izpētes komisija* (2019, New Riga Theatre) can be categorised as publicistic theatre. The five-and-a-half-hour-long production is mostly a humorous theatrical essay by Hermanis and his group on the

topic of disclosing the KGB files that have kept Latvian society on its toes for a long time. The publicist style of Hermanis' production is the same as that described by Juhan Peegel, the legendary Estonian professor of journalism at the University of Tartu.¹

According to Peegel, a publicist style deals with the contemporary times in which the writer lives as well as the current issues of those times, and its goal is to influence the reader. A publicist tries to convince the reader through a variety of facts, demonstrating the content and essence of specific current issues, comparing some facts to others, and using them for illustrative generalisations and thus for proving their point. While doing this, publicists can also use figures of speech in order to prove their point, to convince the reader or to influence the reader's awareness. Thus, a publicist style ties together factfulness and figurativeness. Peegel sees publicist style as a border genre between fiction and journalism. Because publicist-style theatre often uses documentary material, it is often equated with a contemporary approach to theatre. There is, however, an important distinction to be made between the investigative approach that journalism or documentary theatre uses and the one Hermanis' publicist-style theatre exploits. Hermanis' production unveils this distinction with its publicist-style arrogance. It draws on fragments of the Latvian historical experience

1 ERR radio's night university (ööülikool): *Publitsistlik sõna*. <https://arhiiv.err.ee/vaata/raadioulikool-publitsistlik-sona>

(Hermanis uses anthropologic methodology to map how the Latvian political presence is tormented by events from fifty years ago), but it is far from aiming at a truthful journalistic representation of the current political atmosphere. It is worthwhile to examine this production in more detail, because it depicts how a theatrical form aimed at being contemporary can in fact be anachronistic in the way it portrays the ideological conflicts of modern Latvians and how careful one should therefore be when perceiving and analysing this production as an example of contemporary theatre.

In the many dozens of scenes in *History Research Commission*, the New Riga Theatre has compared facts, drawn glaring generalisations and in some rare cases also used strong symbols, such as in the scene about the old Chekist drowned in the kvass barrel, who later delivers a monologue about his "hard job" executing prisoners. However, the focus of the performance is neither on the form (truth be told, it is the least show off-y production by Hermanis that I have seen) nor on discovering the historical truth, but rather on shaping the perception of public life, which weighs heavily on the minds of modern-day Latvians. Prior to creating the dramatic sketches, the theatre group researched the files themselves and also interviewed recruited agents and the operatives who had recruited them. Poetising the topic of the KGB files, or a polemic

dislocation through form or a drama classic – as was done in the Daile Theatre production of *The Witches of Salem (The Crucible)*, in which Arthur Miller's classic text was purposefully used to pursue a genre shift (ballerinas on stage) – would have perhaps been too burdensome, considering the substantive scale of the production.

The story itself has properly theatricalised Latvian public life. After the restoration of independence in Latvia, the parliament tried three times to make the KGB files public, but the Latvian president vetoed the decision every time.² In 2014, it was finally decided that the agent files and intelligence reports found in the "Cheka bags" would be read and worked through by a special commission of researchers. The files were made public in May 2018, but the same decision did not apply to the reports. Both the research itself and the disclosing of the files have been criticised, because it could not be proved whether every person considered to be an agent actually was one or whether the agent candidates were even aware of their status (sometimes data was just gathered on people to ease the recruitment process). After disclosing the files, many poignant stories came to light. One woman from Latgale, for example, could no longer go to church or do her shopping after one of her family members was declared a KGB collaborator. The shame was that strong.

2 Kinstler, L., *A Partial Freedom: What Latvia Found in the KGB Archives* (The New York Review of Books, March 5, 2019).

* Text on the screen:

It is particularly unpleasant to shoot the person, who laughs – either already out of the mind or hating you from the bottom of heart... This meant screaming and swearing on both sides.



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History Research Commission depicts how a theatrical form aimed at being contemporary can in fact be anachronistic in the way it portrays the ideological conflicts of modern Latvians and how careful one should therefore be when perceiving and analysing this production as an example of contemporary theatre.

History Research Commission
(Vēstures izpētes komisija)
New Riga Theatre

Photo: Jānis Deinats

I also visited the website of the State Archives of Latvia and found at least one agent card for a person born in the 19th century. Most of the collaborators, however, are reportedly still quite young – people in their 50s and 60s who still have to live with the mark of being an agent on their foreheads for some decades to come. A pitifully funny story came up while reading the materials on the disclosing of the files: Jānis Rokpelnis, one of the most prominent Latvian poets of the 1970s, confessed to having collaborated with the KGB in 2017, before the files were made public, although later it became evident that not a single word was mentioned about him in the files.³ In the thematic documentary made for the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Latvia, Rokpelnis comments that everything is not lost and he can now even say that he was only joking.

Comedy and grotesque

Instead of Hermanis' *History Research Commission*, this spring the New Riga Theatre was supposed to bring out Henrik Ibsen's *Brand* directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius. But because the distinguished Lithuanian stage director passed away in November 2018, the production had to be substituted. However, the decision could not have come completely out of the blue, because Hermanis and his group had

been planning on dissecting the KGB as a phenomenon on stage since the KGB files were made public.

After the premiere, there were also people who found the New Riga Theatre's approach to the topic too simplified, comical and grotesque. According to the Hermanis group, however, grotesque was the only way to create any sort of observational distance between Latvian society and the public exorcism performance that deals with identity politics. The goal was also to avoid strong didactics. Hermanis himself has said in one of his interviews that it is impossible to put together a generalising performance on the KGB files because every case is unique and the files do not give a full, or probably a fully truthful, idea about what really happened to the people involved and what they actually did.

The acts the recruits did not undertake, the offers they said "no" to, and the amount of evil they prevented from happening through those decisions are equally important. No one keeps a list of those things. According to the director, it was a devilish plan to put all those files into the same pot, and theatre does not want to be part of that plan. Hermanis' production showed me that history is always used for manipulation; events are violated already at their birth, and even in the present day, those most noble of pathologists, the ones who serve the just public hatred, can completely desecrate a body.

The tragedy of historians lies in the fact that they need to undertake their research in the present. But this comes with the assumption that the research material itself has to be at least partially destroyed. Distortion as a method is also embedded in the research process due to the fact that people who have lived through the times that are being studied are not suited for studying it themselves. They can only be research objects, and their statements have to be taken with a pinch of salt. Of course, historians can also make the conscious decision to avoid studying a certain topic or avoid to publish their research results.

The performance begins with a meeting of historians who are facing this same difficult situation – they are a commission that has been assigned to undertake historic-scientific research on the content of the Cheka bags. The 44 sketches in the performance seem to drop onto the stage from the commission's table. The commission also includes a representative of the Latvian diaspora, an expatriate Latvian who does not understand Russian, so on top of reading agent cards and interpreting the reports, the commission's researchers also need to translate for a person who fled to the West to escape the KGB and actually is appointed as the leading expert of the group.

The first two scenes depict the commission's meeting (interestingly, the commission meets in a restaurant due to a lack of facilities!), the dynamics of which are mostly driven by the expatriate Latvian, or at least this is how it looks. In my opinion, his smooth and

slightly patronising Western style of communication was not included in the production by chance. Through this, the New Riga Theatre created a research situation that is curated by someone who speaks no Russian and has no real experience of Soviet Latvia himself – an alternative Latvian who actually does not understand Latvia to a certain point.

A person's filter of experience makes them blind to a society they have not lived in; hence, any talk about discovering scientific truths is nonsense and should not be politically provoked. With suave humour, Hermanis seems to say that the public investigation of the contents of the Cheka bags could not have been a scientific operation; instead, it was a national cultural performance. His statement is supported by the fact that the documentary mentioned earlier ties this holy event to the centennial celebrations of the Republic of Latvia.

Hermanis' decision to not allow any actors to leave the stage despite the unusual length of the performance works as a comment on public life. Even if an actor is not needed in a sketch for a long time, he or she sits quietly at the edge of the stage, getting dressed for the next scene or watching the other actors. This type of Brechtian ploy makes the viewer once again acknowledge that the real research commission was nothing more than a theatre group and the entire society has inevitably been part of the exorcism performance focused on identity politics, including the people standing far away, close to the wall.

3 Laugen, L., *Lāti luuletaja Jānis Rokpelnis tūnistas, et oli KGB koputaja: aitasin aru saada, mis toimub intelligenti peades*, (Delfi, December 27, 2017).

Riga Wall

The third scene introduces the alternative history that periodically creates the rhythm for the performance, namely, Berlin's post-war status is given to Riga. The Riga Wall cuts the city in half and West Riga becomes a Hong Kong-like capitalist oasis in the middle of Soviet Riga.

Hermanis uses this symbol for two purposes. First, he uses it to mock the politically driven expectations surrounding the collapse of the Riga Wall that society kept alive for decades – the belief that making the KGB files public will bring liberation. We are obviously dealing with a parodic device. Second, Hermanis uses this symbol to criticise the West, depicting it as a place of opulence in the middle of modern-day Riga but which is actually an oasis forced into defence mode by the vulnerable security situation, just like West Berlin.

These lectures are not chronicles of an alternative Latvian history but a map of the current mental state of Europe, which is quite on par with the director's national conservative and Eurosceptic views (although the performance was a group creation). Europe is like an unreal civilisation forced into defence mode, which is represented in Latvia in a half diplomatic, half colonising way. At least, Europe has not been embraced by post-communist Latvia; it has not dissolved into it. It seems that, according to Hermanis, the cultural act of making the KGB files public is the result of a deficit of cultural self-awareness, a duty to the

West, the neurotic and self-harming statement of a West-craving Latvian.

The production then shows many humorous scenes of recruitment by the KGB and the ensuing relationships between recruiter and recruit. The KGB officials are not highly caricatured; quite the opposite, caricatures are more often used to portray the recruits, including the ones active in the cultural field. There is not a single scene on stage that would meet one's expectations, including the non-standard behaviours of the KGB officials and the recruiters. With this, the New Riga Theatre is teasing the audience, discouraging anyone who expected the disclosing of the files to bring enlightenment.

Decomposing trauma in a tank of nostalgia

Next to this very human message, Hermanis' humorous but still simplified criticism of the West comes off as odd. The Soviet occupation and its repressive acts are shown more from the "us" perspective. This is the element that Latvia has incorporated, the Soviet style, the postcolonial identity. But the Western stuff still feels alien. It is likely that I interpret the production whilst too deeply affected by the political views of the director. A kinder and perhaps more just interpretation would be that the West Berlin symbol is used more as a statement.

You never know, perhaps EU membership arrived psychologically too

early for the Baltic states. It would have helped to first go through a decolonisation process, followed by a restoration of self-awareness, and only then deciding whom and under what conditions to join. But this kind of "would have" was an illicit bad boy, at least in 2004. At the time, joining the EU and the West was emotionally similar to the new marriage of a woman who has just escaped a violent (ex-) husband, not knowing which part of her affections are real emotions towards the new husband and which are unresolved anxiety and an attempt to escape digesting the trauma. In this way, Hermanis as a publicist has managed to create a powerful symbol through the West Riga colony.

Still, in summary, the one-dimensional symbol of the West was presented as an oasis of the cult of materialistic success or as an imperialistic outpost in the wilderness of Eastern Europe. Thus, those two parallel endeavours – to humanise and to heterogenise the Soviet repressions and to unequivocally demonise the West at the same time – seem contradictory. But after seeing the performance, I have to admit that even this contradiction might play its part in the publicistic impact of Hermanis' production.

On the artistic level, Hermanis has this time stayed away from his usual, slightly insipid poetics. Latvian actors tend to be bold on stage, lyrical to the limits of good taste, but I am

not certain whether I attribute the inherent lyricism of the Latvian language to them. As can be expected, the set design follows the Soviet nostalgia route: the visual scene is dominated by an authentic tank of kvass from the Soviet period, from which the body of

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In both Estonia and Latvia theatre seems to care for identity confirmation much more than identity development through its constant critique.

a drowned Chekist climbs out at the end. The realisation of the Chekist's death reaches the taste buds of the kvass drinkers through the tap – the body has already decomposed into slurry.

To me, this final symbol speaks of nostalgia (the kvass tank) as well as of the means to contain and dissolve trauma (the Chekist). Nostalgic people do not try to push the trauma aside, to deny it; it is nostalgia that makes the trauma digestible. While researching history, lots of new, dark violence gets added to the bygone repressions that people tend to not even be aware of – violence towards the events and the motifs that really took place. Through his production, Hermanis seems to say that researching history, especially traumatic history, can in some cases prolong the effect of the crimes committed.

History Research Commission was nominated for the Performers' Night Latvian Theatre Award in five categories but only received the award for best actor in a supporting role for Vilis Daudziņš, one of the most highly acclaimed Latvian actors of the past decade. The sweeping winner at the awards gala was *Blow, Wind!*, a performance exultingly celebrating the Latvian Song Festival tradition. With this as a background, Hermanis' production feels even more important with its internal controversies. The humour of the Latvian national exorcism performance has been successfully conveyed – and this will not be so easily forgiven. The publicist-style arrogance of Hermanis' production is that of a true auteur, a person (or rather a group of persons, in the case of *History Research Commission*) who risks provocative controversy to unveil versions of truths that the audience does not necessarily look forward to hearing. *Blow, Wind!* by Elmārs Seņkovs speaks the Latvian mainstream national ideology fluently and therefore resembles a state-sponsored ceremony (like the May 4 military parade) rather than the art of theatre. In both Estonia and Latvia theatre seems to care for identity confirmation much more than identity development through its constant critique. Thus, theatre is corroding the social significance of art as a catalyst for liberty. Because theatre is an art form that is largely financed by public funds, its inner moral and social unawareness or disorientation means that public funds aimed at the flourishing of Latvian culture are spent

on theatre as a mode of governance of national identity rather than a form of art.

It could have all been done in a more human manner

As an Estonian, those five and a half hours of the *History Research Commission* offered me the following solace: if one starts feeling sad again about how unprecedentedly and horribly wrong things are at home, it is always worthwhile to go and have a look at how the neighbours are doing to become convinced that certain things at home could also turn out a lot worse. At least on the surface, the process of disclosing KGB officials has been organised in a more humane way in Estonia. If I am not mistaken, anyone who is interested can go to the archives to see whether and who was snooping around about them on behalf of the powers of the occupying regime. And then decide whether they want to drag out history longer through their archive visit or not.

May the diversity of content in Hermanis' production be what it is, it unequivocally tells people to refrain from public laceration ceremonies. There is no question about it, the truth about occupations and other crimes needs to be brought to light. But no one, neither the repressors nor the victims nor the historical research, wins from this type of political, highly theatricalised sacrifice ritual, says the research report by the *History Research Commission* of the New Riga Theatre.

text means anything, text means nothing

My position towards text in theatre that I try to do is double sided. I have worked and I still do work in situations where a written text (a play) is asked and is needed as a starting point before the rehearsals start. At the same time theatre is not a text. I am still curious to understand the ways how to start to build theatrical setup that doesn't take text as a starting point. Regarding this, the key word for me here is a word "setup" – a theatrical setup or I would prefer to use a term **performative setup**. As a term suggests "something that has been set up", in this case a performative situation. Everyday life consists of performative setups. A well written play sets up a performative situation. "Artist is present" by Marina Abramovic is a performative setup where she was present at the Museum of Modern Art for 736-hour and 30-minutes sitting immobile in the museum's atri-

um while spectators were invited to take turns sitting opposite her. Sitting down in theatre, facing a stage and paying attention to what happens on the stage (unspoken agreement is not to disturb the show) is a performative setup. I can say I don't have a problem with the former performative setup but for some reason I am curious what else theatre could be? What else theatre could do? And I assume that to understand that, I am trying to learn the ways and tools that would help to think of performative setup that is not entirely rooted in text. To formulate it in other words – to think more about what happens between an audience member and a performer/actor. What kind of spectatorship is being activated? Where is the stage located? What is at stake (in reality and in fiction)? And how is the performative setup mirroring the content, theme or questions of the material?

The artistic essay below was written during my master studies at DAS Theatre program in Amsterdam in the spring of 2020. The studies are positioned as a two year full time, experimental, residency type program with mentorship and extensive exchange of feedback between other participants. I can say that the program laid down some fundamental knowledge about the ways how to think and work with performative setups. My experience there helped me to articulate and question my previous work, and at the same time understand importance of working in the studio. I realised that a work that tries to deal with spectatorship needs a test spectator/s much earlier than a general rehearsal. It might sound obvious but it wasn't obvious for me – a professionally trained playwright. And it is still my challenge – to think and think again not about the text but about what is that text or act

Here we are – me, sitting in a bed, and he, standing right behind the front door.

I try to imagine how he would look like? I think is he the same presence I have felt before? Usually, when coming back home late, walking up the stairs and thinking – what if something comes out from somewhere? What if it firstly appears at distance? That there is some distance between you and that being. The thing is seeing you. Observing you. And you are standing still. It makes a first step towards you. And you don't know what is going to happen.

There is now a knock on a door.

I hear the knock. I'm in my room – Dennenrodepad 393. 393 is a number of my metal container that contains me, my shower and toilet, and my room that is also a kitchen. I take a look outside. There are more containers. My container is a part of campus of 1250 containers that are divided into 15 groups. Each of those groups are either 3 or 4 storeys (containers) high with an open hallway in between and entrances into the containers to both sides of the hallway. I am still in my bed that is approximately 3,2 square meters large. The bed occupies 15,5% of the total square meters I have. The math exercise would now ask to tell what is the total amount of square meters of the container (3,2 is 15,5, x is 100, so x is $(32 \times 100 \times 10) / (155 \times 10)$)?

Again I hear a knock on the door.

It takes 6 steps for me to reach the door. I see myself doing that. I see myself opening and letting him in. My eyes don't register him. One could say – there is no-one there. But there is. The presence of the one who is arrived manifests itself into sounds.

I hear him taking off the jacket and boots.

I return to the bed.

I hear him washing hands, drying them, then coming closer, taking a chair and placing it closer to the bed, sitting down.

GUEST. Hi.

ME. Hi.

The voice sounds familiar.

GUEST. I am here to have a moment with you.

I think I know this voice.

GUEST. I think by now you know who I am.

ME. Yes, I think. You are welcome. Do you want some tea?

GUEST. No, it's okay. I can't not notice that you refer to me in your writing as a "guest".

ME. Aren't you a guest, are you?

GUEST. Well, who is in front of you?

ME. A voice.

GUEST. How do I sound like?

ME. I think it's my voice. It sounds very similar to the one I have now, but it is still different. It's not from the past. When I hear you, I think your voice has accumulated time and things. It's the voice from days ahead.

GUEST. How many days ahead?

ME. I think some 25 years, you could be 57.

GUEST. So, I'm not a guest anymore?

ME. No.

The GUEST transforms into ME57. ME transforms into ME32.

I take a look outside again. I am not bothered by his presence. Or the fact that there is someone from the future sitting in my room. I'm not even sure that he is the presence I thought I will suddenly encounter when coming home late, walking up the stairs or walking down a long hallway.

"Am I disappointed?" I think. Did I want it to be something more? Did I want it to be something more spectacular? What did I think there was behind the door? Did I thought it would someone from other side or maybe Death itself? Or maybe it is Death?

ME57. I am not Death, sorry.

Well, he can read my thoughts. For now I choose to have a audible conversation.

ME32. Why are you here?

ME57. I think I am a bit lost. I think it is good to be lost in some way but I don't like being lost in the way I am now. In fact, I am trying to do you a favour.

ME32. I am not sure that I understand.

ME57. Let me explain. I can start with the question – do you think that life is long?

ME32. To what kind of life do you refer to?

ME57. We both are a part of artistic essay, right? So I do refer to artistic life or trajectory, if you like.

ME32. Okay, but can I go and wash dishes while we talk?

ME57. Like now?

ME32. I could do it now.

ME57. I don't know.

ME32. I think it helps to talk. I mean, you gather in a kitchen, do things, talk about stuff, right?

ME57. No. It's not anymore like this from where I am coming from.

ME32. What do you mean?

ME57. It's true. Everything now has to happen as it has to happen. You would get a huge fine if you would start talk about art stuff while washing dishes.

Pause.

ME57. It's a joke. Go for it.

ME32. He, super funny.

ME32 takes 4 steps to the sink and starts washing up dishes.

ME32. You have a cheesy question.

ME57. Sorry.

I don't know how to go with it. And he can read my thoughts. Fuck it. Okay, I can cancel this question if I think about Yoko Ono. Three steps from my sink is my Amsterdam book shelf. On the third shelf is "Grapefruit". It is a book that contains instructions to imagine things. I think she wanted to say that everyone can do art. Maybe at first a person can see the she or he can create things by following her instructions and then later understanding that it isn't so hard to come up with your own manuals. I think it was important for Yoko that this kind of instruction practice becomes a part of everyday. Or in other words – borders between life and art disappears. Everything becomes artistic practice. I also felt that she tried to produce not maybe explicit, but very powerful political message.

ME57. Can you say why it is political?

ME32. With political I mean the way how Hans-Thies Lehmann refers to political in Postdramtic Theatre. I think there he describes that a piece not necessarily becomes political if you put refugees on a stage. Explicit topic is not enough to make it really political. A piece becomes political if it refers to ways we are together. In other words – how does this event functions? What kind of a power dynamic is there? And is this dynamic acknowledged and addressed in some way?

But I want to come back to erasing border between art and life, and why this is political. Maybe she thought that canceling that border will stop many things. Maybe she thought that people need to see that everyone can build out from herself / himself nice things all the time.

ME57. Everyone can build out nice things – you mean everyone can make art?

ME32. Yes, creation process is possible for everyone. Maybe someone will ask – from where are those things coming from? One can think as it, but it will not change the fact that the access is there and things can come. I think she thought about it as a liberating feeling. Even more – it is is another world that you have access to. You can seemingly from nowhere materialise things in this world or change the way how you can perceive reality. I think she thought it is something that will expand freedom.

ME57. And if you have felt this freedom, you want to keep it. You also can also see that taking a part in a war is taking a part in someone's wish to materialise some reality. Maybe before you thought – I will follow this vision, but now you know that you can make your own visions.

ME32. But this will not work if there is good art and bad art. If there are museums. If there is that border between art and life.

ME57. And – what do you think about it in 2020?

ME32. What exactly do you mean?

ME57. Isn't everyone creative? Isn't everyone an artist now? Don't we all create and create, and create great immaterial things?

ME32. And how is it in 2045?

ME57. Can you finish those dishes?

ME32. Yes, of course.

ME32 finish the washing up, puts the kettle on.

ME57. As I said in 2045 I feel a bit lost. I don't like the way how I am being lost.

ME32. What is that way?

ME57. It was connected with the question – "isn't life long?" But you wanted to go sideways about Ono. Fine. I come back to it now.

ME32. Yes, please.

ME57. Either you perceive life and art as one or two separate things, I am busy with the ways how can you reinvent yourself. I am here that you would be busy with this too.

ME32. If you say this, it almost feels that you are not me 25 years after.

ME57. What do you mean?

ME32. You would know that the main thing about me being here in this container for around 18 months for two years is to be busy with reinventing myself.

ME57. Great, I want to hear more how is it going.

ME32. Why? You are me in the future. You know every detail about the things now, you know what is in front of me.

ME57. Okay, I am here on a suicide mission.

ME32. Okay.



The kettle boils and switches off.

ME57. The moment I walked in I started to delete myself. I am sure that after our conversation you are going to do some things differently. This means my past will be changed. The outcome of this meeting will be different "you" after 25 years and, it means different me. This means, that the "me" who is now in front of you, who speaks to you now is going to vanish. I will vanish. And it's fine. It's already too late to stop this. I will just tell how I am being lost and why I don't like it. No. I will tell the way I like to be lost. I like being lost and feeling hungry. But I am not anymore hungry for something. Hunger is gone. At some point I lost it. Maybe I didn't take care of it. It is absolutely nightmarish to not have it. I thought that if I will get lost again, it will appear. It didn't. I was trying the usual getting lost routine – new territories, overloading, losing focus, but there was no more this tiny, little voice who guides me through. The voice who talks to my hunger, so you intuitively assemble the new meal to eat. I am not sure but I am afraid that this "not feeling hungry anymore" will sip into other parts of my life. In some way – your life. When I say this, I think of someone.

ME32. Who?

ME57. Our grandmother.

ME32. We don't know if that was her reason to..

ME57. To go?

ME32. Yes.

ME57. Yes, we don't know. But I already can recognise some things of her in me.

ME32. You mean you wish to wake up in the morning and then right after go to sleep again? And you want sleep all the time until one day you will fall asleep forever as she did?

ME57. I am afraid I might arrive to this in the near future.

ME32. Hunger.

ME57. It's about being hungry.

What does he want? What does he think he can get here? Everything I am busy with could possibly in the future start to erode the hunger he is

speaking about. What does he want to dissect here? What does he want to look at? My personality traits? My habits? My thinking? My tools? My values? My beliefs? My hopes? My dreams? My strategies? And why are you afraid of a decision not to wake up anymore? It might be that you have grown to be very, very tired. Why don't you ask me how is tiredness building up? How does weight on your shoulders increase? How much can you eat? And have you looked into a face of that hunger?

ME57. I haven't. Have you? Isn't everything we do now in this talk an attempt to see it?

ME32. Yes, if you like.

ME57. I don't want to go yet. I have no plan. And I have no criteria that would indicate me that things here in our conversation are done.

ME32. Ah, so you are planning to stay forever.

ME57. No, if you will say to me "go", I will.

ME32. Go.

ME57 stands up walks to the door.

ME32. Stop. Not yet.

ME57 stops.

ME57. Time travel is weird. We have it now, but almost no one uses it. Because in 99% it means to vanish. And the feeling I feel now is weird. That I am alive, but I know that I am not anymore. And I also remember this room. Even after 25 years. How many steps?

ME32. To what?

ME57. To a bookshelf.

ME32. From a place you are, I would say two and a half.

ME57. One, two, yes. Two and a half. Five shelves. Two rows of books. On the third shelf the ones you read. On the fourth shelf the ones you wanted but you didn't have time to. Three steps to the opposite wall. 88 key keyboard. One step to the right - the table. Instrument cables. Do you want to know how everything went with this music thing?

ME32. No, I don't want to.

ME57. Okay. What's there?

ME57 gets back to the bookshelf.

ME57. Fifth shelf. Five notebooks. Some thirteen, some fifteen years old. High school poems, notes and diaries.

ME57 opens one and reads.

ME57. Sniegs krīt un krājas uz jumtiem
Nākotne pārtiek no sapņiem
Domas nav radītas burtiem
Cālis ir slepkava tārpiem
Ja jumti kristu sniegā
Bēdas pārvērstos priekā

For a moment, ME18 appears and translates.

ME18. Snow falls and accumulates on rooftops.
The future has to eat dreams.
Thoughts are not made for letters.
Chick is a killer for worms.
If the roofs will fall in the snow,
Sorrow would turn into joy.

ME32. Great, let's invite everyone.

ME18. So this is how it's going to look like. Amazing!

ME32. Amazing? Fuck you! Look at this guy! He has traveled from the future, and he is about to vanish. Basically he did a suicide. And why? Because he is getting tired and thinks apathy will come and take over him. And then look at me. I am here with your fucking notebooks! And - be happy that I found one poem that doesn't sound like a total garbage. Secondly, how insane you were thinking that the last thing you want is to sit behind the desk from 9 to 5. Well, I can tell you now - quite often I sit from 9 to 9. Or more. At the moment I am sitting in this bed 6 days in a row, and I haven't spoke to any other living being than that pile of sadness by the bookshelf and you, my young poet. And guess what - for have many years since I started to work, I have been fully socially ensured?

ME18. Six?

ME32. Four. When I worked in a theatre wardrobe.

ME57. Can I say something?

ME32. No.

ME18. I have to say it still sounds like, great, no?

ME32. Of course. Yes. Go back and continue to suffer and write. Now!

ME18 disappears.

ME57. Wasn't it nice?

ME32. What?

ME57. 6 days. No people.

ME32. It was.

ME57. You were not kind to him.

ME32. True. I slipped.

ME57. Where are your DAS notebooks?

ME32. In the locker. At school.

ME57. I have a DAS shelf for them, I went through them before coming.

ME32. And?

ME57. No poems there.

ME32. There were some.

ME57. Not so many.

ME32. There were many other things.

ME57. Things about care. About fiction. Why fiction?

ME32. You want to discuss fiction?

ME57. Please.

ME32. To make a shift in reality and to make reality more real. Although, I don't know if it is still true for me.

ME57. Why?

ME32. There could be also reasons to discard fiction. One reason would be a belief that things change if they are named as they are. I don't think that it is a good enough reason not to use fiction.

ME57. Why?

ME32. Because I think that whatever I try to evoke into someone, in the end something that gets evoked will always be more important to that someone than my thing that was evoking it. I think of this as a rock concert. I will never be a headliner. I can only be an opening band, and each person in the audience will either bring or not bring out their own headliner. If my opening band plays blues, but their headliners has no connection to blues at all, they can just admire me playing my blues.

ME57. Which is also a thing.

ME32. Yes. And can be super effective one. It can actually create a situation where you would ask: "How come I have thought about blues so little?" In this case, I would still say that even you don't have your own headliner that can play the blues, you can still have a conversation with your festival manager, who is asking you: "Well, I have tried to make you more aware about the blues, and maybe now you will start to be interest in them."

ME57. In a way person's festival manager aka conscience becomes the headliner. I think this is the most amazing thing to happen, isn't it?

ME32. It is definitely very powerful. At the same time – you have to have that manager showing up.

ME57. Otherwise no headliner coming out. No festival manager going into conversation with you. You don't find interesting to admire someone playing blues. You become an audience member in front something that does something, and it is irritating or boring, or maybe just nothing for you. Which is also not so bad. But, anyways, I want to continue with fiction. So – despite the fact that naming things can be super effective, this would still not be a reason to discard fiction.

ME32. Yes, if I continue the analogy of the rock concert, I see a potential in creating a relationship between my opening band and headliner/s. With acknowledgement of frontal confrontation, I am looking for the ways how something can come from aside. How would it be possible that someone suddenly realises that there is something walking with him / her already for some time, but that someone doesn't know for how long it has been there? For this to happen I need audience to bring out their headliners. I need to see how can we play together. I also see this situation as being a magician. I have spent very long time alone (sometimes not alone) to

prepare to pull out those things I am pulling out now as a magician. In a way – I have been thinking about the meeting with the audience for a very long time. So then there is a very important trick that I think is actually not a trick – you trust someone who cares for you. A term “care” is something that I would try to explore further, look for different intriguing ways of care creation in performative setups.

ME57. And fiction?

ME32. If time and effort transforms into sensing care, and this transforms into trust and if I still want you to suddenly feel an uncanny shadow walking along with you, and it is even more uncanny that you don’t now since when and for how long, and what it is exactly, I might need fiction that can help to secure care, trust and playing that despite the uncanny shadow. I also think that everybody involved needs to know we are buying into this fiction, but it’s fun a thing to do so we continue. I think of this as a Blair Witch Project.

ME57. Which you haven’t seen.

ME32. For now I have read a script. I might now try watch the movie in daylight. But the whole problem with me and any other film like Blair Witch is that I lose the element that I am buying into that fiction. In fact I would be happy to enjoy it as much as I enjoy reading Poe or Ligotti where I constantly negotiate between being in the bed and being in the house of Usher. Tell me, am I becoming a horror movie director in the future?

ME57. Go and get a magic yes / no ball and ask this to the ball.

ME32. I hate you.

ME57. That’s okay, I am actually puzzled about something else.

ME32. Of course.

ME57. No seriously. I think you will agree that you are playwright who has went through classical Russian writing school.

ME32. Do you say that you know what is classical Russian school?

ME57. Everybody dreams to be Chekhov, so the goal is to create a closed, self-efficient, universal work. It has to be closed, so it can become eternal. With eternal I mean that it can make sense now, after 25 years and forever.

Saying this, I think that the elements you mentioned and how they work together, meaning:

effort that transforms into **care**, **care** that transforms into **trust**, **trust** that make **playing** possible and makes sure that **uncanny shadow** appears unnoticed (which you sometime refer to as **a knife**), but it doesn’t end anything because there is **fiction** that functions as a safety net and at the same time can lure us more into the **dark**.

That this for me looks like an attempt to have again something closed, self-sufficient and universal in all eternity. Sorry, saying this, my question is:

how to keep things open? How to make sure that there are gaps? That there are gaps in the work? And there are gaps in the ways you arrive to a work? How those gaps can function as invitations for the audience in your work? And how those gaps in your process / work can REALLY function as something that can ask the question: “What this process / work *could be*?” And are you actually interested in having a work / process that is possibly not closed, eternal and seeing more of what things *could be*.

And in the end – if you keep yourself busy with these question – can you stay hungry?

ME32. I have a story on my mind. A few days ago. I had a conversation with a member of a famous synth wave band from the 80ties. He told me about the relationship he has with his neighbour. He told that his neighbour who works as a lawyer, sees him working at night – sitting behind the keyboard, composing. Neighbour calls him and says: “I see that you are awake, do you want to come by?” And he comes, and neighbour shows him that he has bought an analogue synthesiser, because despite he is working as a lawyer, he graduated from a music school and has interest in music. They check the synth, and then that guy from the band says, it’s great, although now I am making everything with MIDI keyboard and Cubase.

After some time there is another night, the same call, he comes, and neighbour has bought MIDI keyboard and Cubase, and says that now he is going to make things with this, and maybe the band guy can show some ways and tricks. “Sure,” the band guy says, “only I am not sure I will remember everything right, because I switched to Logic some time ago.” “Oh,” neighbour says.

SHADI
PAUR
The question would be - what will happen the next time the neighbour calls? Will he share whatever he has made on no matter what or will he show that he has Logic now?

ME57. How is this relating to the questions above?

ME32. Why do you want everything to relate to everything? I think it is a nice story that tells a lot about relationship with instruments and the act of playing. Yes, there are "instruments" that do not go for exploring what a performative setup *could be* and and there "instruments" that do that more. And I don't know what will make you hungry forever.

ME57. I think you have avoided to answer the question.

ME32. No. What is this hunger? Why do you want this hunger? Where do you want it to take you? Where do you want to arrive? What hasn't happened yet for you? Or actually your question is - do you want to remembered or do you want to be forgotten?

ME57. Maybe this is the question. Maybe not anymore for me, because I am going to go. But maybe for you.

ME32. Right, not for you. I forgot.

ME57. It's fine. I have had good time, and I tried my best.

ME32. There should be some way how you can not disappear.

ME57. It's fine.

ME32. Then just stay. We can still hang out, you know.

ME57. No, it's time.

ME32 remains silent.

ME57. You have to say it.

ME32 shakes his head.

ME57. Common.

ME32. Go.

ME57 leaves.

ME32 becomes me.



Elmārs Seņkovs



Regnārs Vaivars



Inga Tropa



Vladislavs Nastavševs



Valters Sīlis



Klāvs Mellis



Alvis Hermanis

Compiled by LAUMA MELLĒNA-BARTKEVIČA

Theatre in the Age of Changing Rules

Usually, they do not talk much. Especially about their productions, unless forced by the marketing department or spotted by journalists at the premiere. Originally, this material was planned as a discussion, but due to Covid-19 restrictions, it turned out to be individual Q&A series by seven Latvian stage directors, who leave notable footprint in the last decade's Latvian theatre scene. They are as diverse as contemporary Latvian theatre field, from newcomers to renowned masters mentioned previously throughout this bookazine: **Elmārs Seņkovs, Regnārs Vaivars, Inga Tropa, Vladislavs Nastavševs, Valters Sīlis, Klāvs Mellis** and **Alvis Hermanis**.

During the last decade, the devised theatre has become a notably widespread phenomenon. In your opinion, what are the main gains or losses of such a co-creative process?

Elmārs Seņkovs: The teamwork is very important for me. Before each production, I assess quite extensively which artists I will work with. It is essential to have a person at my side, with whom I could have a professional conversation. Mainly this person is a scenographer, occasionally a choreographer. During the co-creation process, I sometimes feel like a psychologist, producer, leader, trying to steer everyone toward the same goal. Occasionally, I have to find a balance among the artists, so that the common vision would not get lost. I want to feel safe in my team. I trust my colleagues, and allow them to explore – sometimes even demand – that the thing

they are working on would challenge each of them a bit. Not just some catering to the director, but a pursuit of the highest value of one's own work. All the little ambitions put together often make the emerging product better than mediocre. Maybe even an outstanding product. If all of us feel comfortable, we cannot reach the top. I am not interested in staff that caters to the whims of the director, but in artists that can offer something special. It is not essential in which theatre troupe one works, but it is important to meet the right sort of artists in this theatre. Alternatively, you could work with people, with whom you are not afraid to plunge into the unknown.

Regnārs Vaivars: The gains of the co-creation process are countless, and they are indisputable. It is more interesting, more fun, it has more love and less work. That is everything that people strive for and long for.

Regrettably, the theatre companies that I work for leave such a short time for the rehearsals of the production that these past years I had to choose radically opposite ways to reach the qualitatively adequate result that would satisfy me. Nevertheless, I had worked with actors, by writing, as well as by creating the rest of the production's outfit and shape. Simply, when taking this path, one should stick to working with the same team of actors and developing the co-creative skills together. Currently, I prefer to create the production in my head in a maximally detailed manner in order to be maximally prepared. When working with particular actors, I would be sufficiently flexible and attentive, would not fear to take the concept that I have constructed in my head, to deconstruct it in tiny details, and then to put it back together in a manner suitable for the specific actors. The more detailed the scheme I have put together in my head, the easier it is for me to deconstruct it and to re-assemble it in other combinations, without losing any of the components of my equation, but rather gaining a few more. This is exactly the reason why I in my most recent productions am the author, among other things, scenogra-

phy, choreography, music. I reshape the author's text,¹ and write the text for my productions – the scripts as well as librettos in poetic form. Mostly, I choose to create so called author's theatre.

Inga Tropa: The gains are the widening of the subject matter and it is more in-depth analysis. If the rest of the team is also sufficiently interested in the subject matter and genuinely has joined in the process of research and analysis, transforms the information into a creative material, the performance acquires a multifaceted narration, which, in turn, provides more options for a viewer to interpret it and to identify with it. In such a model of theatre-making, the hardest task for a director is not to become confused by the sheer volume of the manifold choices, to be able to shape a unified final story, yet also not to be scared to take risks even up to the last moment, to be elastic, to make room for changes in the envisioned final result. In the scheme of co-creation, the director must also be a skilled psychologist, in order to unify and unleash the creativity of the rest of the team, so that the team members could create and contribute their creative input at a high

rate, to produce rich content that, in turn, requires mutual revision, selection, thus raising it up a notch. The director must constantly be ready to give up his personal ideas, if they do not contribute to the intended result of the entire ever-changing co-created material. Nonetheless, he must not drown in his own team and lose his authority. Essentially, the director must become a subtle manipulator – on the one hand, being very open and interested in diverse view-points, capable of accepting sometimes even completely opposite opinions and heated discussions, yet regarding all of them as valuable and worth utilizing in the creative work, and, on the other hand, not losing the designated central question and vision. The losses that the director faces during the co-creation process are mainly pertaining to the fact, that there is always something that is sacrificed for the sake of compromises. And also the fact, that time to time one has to invest too much additional energy to remind everyone about the boundaries and hierarchy, because, although the designation of roles in such a collaborative process is broader and more flexible, nonetheless – there can exist only one *chief conductor*. Otherwise, the co-created product cannot be completed in full value.

Vladislavs Nastavševs: When starting my work on a production, I seldom have a ready-made vision, rather it is a feeling, a set of subject matters that I want to tackle. The final product in the theatre is practically always a fruit of co-creation. On the one hand, I am a rather authoritarian director, on

the other – I'm very dependent on the team I work with. It is not the case, that the actor is the only subordinate occupation. The director is very much dependent on his collaborative partners as well. I personally attach great importance to not only the senses, skills and talents of all the involved persons, but also their personal character. When a director enters into some theatre troupe, in reality the range of choices that are available to him are quite limited. For example, he cannot choose a technical director, yet so much depends on it. Frequently it is impossible to get the specific actors with whom you would like to work, or you can get only two actors out of five. These are unending compromises and adjustments. Besides, there is such a thing as expectations of theatre managers and their vision about their audience, and one must consider it. Sometimes it is hard to discern, who is making the production – me, or the manager, or the producer, because our interests and notions about what makes a good theatre are different. I find it extremely important that people place their trust in me. For example, the production of Lorca's *Blood Wedding* at the Latvian National Theatre (2016) turned out so well, because the collaboration based on trust and the development of ideas happened in a productive reciprocation. On the contrary, the production *Bird of Youth with Sweet Voice* (*Jaunības putns ar saldo balsi*, orig. play *Sweet Bird of Youth* by Tennessee Williams) in the New Riga Theatre (2018) failed for many different reasons, because the joint efforts did not find a common wavelength. When

1 *Scenes from Married Life* (*Laulības dzīves ainas*, based on Ingmar Bergman's play, Daile Theatre, 2016), *Two Sisters and a Girlfriend* (*Divas māsas un draudzene*, based on Mika Myllyaho's "Chaos," Gertrude Street Theatre, 2016), *Flying Trivolta* (*Lidojošais Trivolta*, a play by Artūrs Dīcis, Latvian National Theatre, 2017), *Silent Night, Drunken Night* (*Klusa nakts, dzēra nakts*, based on Ivan Viripaev's play "The Drunks," Valmiera Drama Theatre, 2017), *The Blue Room* (*Zilā istaba*, based on David Hare's play, Liepāja Theatre, 2018), *Ivanov!* (*Ivanovs!*, based on Anton Chekhov's play, Daile Theatre, 2018), *Passion Train* (*Kaisles vilciens*, based on Tennessee Williams's "Streetcar named desire," Daile Theatre, 2018), *Trudging through Marshland in Fire* (*Purva bridējs ugunī*, based on Rūdolfs Blaumanis' novel and play, Liepāja Theatre 2019) – editor's note.

one can gather a team with which one had already previously worked on something, and the result had turned out great, then it is a completely different story – it is true happiness.

Valters Silis: I think that this is how theatre actually works. It always has been a collective process unless one person has done everything. Director's responsibility is to make sure that all the elements are working for the purpose of the performance. Thus, this part of this profession has not lost its meaning in most of the cases. Depending on the performance, I have experienced different ways of organizing the creative process. Quite often, I am still working in a very traditional way where I am directing the team towards the result, which I have envisioned, but, given the way I work, it cannot happen without large creative input from all the participants. The difference is that I have set the boundaries of our common work. However, I have had quite a number of works where the creation happens in a real collaboration, where the idea how the performance will work comes out from the dialogue. Sometimes, it is a co-work with a playwright to find the way in which the production could work and it would be interesting for both of us. There have been cases when the authorship has been spread out evenly among all the participants of the performance. In order for such a collaboration to work well, it is very important to have mutual trust and respect. What you lose in such a process is the status, that you can just make decisions without much explanation. In collaborative process, you

have to have teammates who accept your proposals. At the same time, it is important to be able to discern when your vision starts to diverge and then you have to find a common ground. What I like about devised theatre is that members can push each other into unknown territories and you can really surprise yourself about capabilities you did not know you had. To make it work it is very important to listen respectfully to each contributor's creative process, because it is a very intimate process and it can be easily broken, if team members are not attentive toward one other. In such cases, it is very hard to arrive at any results.

Klāvs Mellis: I do not believe that the director himself would specifically get any gains or losses during the process of co-creation. In the repertoire theatres of Latvia, in ninety-nine percent of the cases a director is ultimately the person, who has an unwritten power and final say, whether the creative process will be governed as a dictatorship, democracy, anarchy or something else. Moreover, by having this very choice, the director becomes "the highest institution of an artistic hierarchy." In a word – even the very method of co-creation is mainly a director's own choice. In reality, I in all truth cannot really imagine any currently existing Latvian theatre troupe that would fundamentally function as a team of artists, who would preserve a horizontal hierarchy during the entire creative process. I myself have never practiced in this way. As an idea, this seems to me very nice, but practically – it is terribly complicated.

Alvis Hermanis: Theatre always and at all times had been created by utilizing the creative input of an entire team and all the people involved. This factor has distinguished theatre from other forms of art for centuries. If we talk about the collective creation of dramaturgy, then I do not know and have not heard of a single case, that the production would have happened without a director's leadership. At least in the European professional theatres. Maybe in some amateur theatres it is different, but I cannot give an opinion of that. Likewise, no one has ever heard that somebody would like to entrust flying an airplane to some team, rather than to the pilot. It would be an interesting experiment, though.

What do you understand as a text in the contemporary theatre? What is your preferred form of text that you like to work with the most (a classical play, adaptation or localization, an original creation or co-creation, the dramatization of works of prose, etc.) and why?

Elmārs Senkovs: Contemporary theatre is a theatre created today. Correspondingly, the text is such, as to address the today's subject matters. I am accustomed to search for it in the classical works. Quite often, I create it together with the playwrights from scratch, too. Of course, the production of new texts demands a lot of work and attention. The classical works, on the contrary, come with a ready-made structure that you can adapt as you

see fit. The text in the contemporary theatre has to fight hard against visualization. Visual arts are becoming clearer, smarter, and more perceivable. The text perception for the modern person requires some effort. The text in the contemporary theatre will go on fighting with visualization, however, the text will never disappear entirely, I am sure of that. The text creates live and concrete connection. Sometimes everything can be trivialized as well. Therefore, I truly hope that finally we will see the development of even stronger drama. To achieve that we still have a long way to go.

Regnārs Vaivars: I prefer to work with my own text or with my own adaptations of some texts by other authors. Therefore the question "how much does it mean for you" is itself begging for an answer "very much." However, the most essential aspect for me is the very fable of the story, because, if the fable is good, then everything else can be added to it in writing., I can stage the play completely without any text, or with very little text. Anything is possible nowadays.

Inga Tropa: Text is one of the tools with which I can play around in many different ways. But the primary thing in creation of the production for me is the entire thought and vision of the play, which I want to express through this specific work, and only then the methods emerge that help to achieve this vision in the specific creation process. At the same in my works a great significance is given to the form and the methods (as well as to the form of the text), and sometimes it may influence even the main idea of the play.

Vladislavs Nastavševs: I have worked with plays, novels, short stories, *verbatim*, as well as written something myself in collaboration with the actors. The plays I use less frequently. Probably I feel the most at ease with the texts of prose, but I have had various experiences with them as well. The text alone can never guarantee the success of the play. Because of our cultural tradition, the text in Latvian theatre is very important, practically, in many productions it still plays the dominant role. I belong to this tradition, because I grew up reading books. I can clearly picture those works that could be produced without a text because, in all truth, it is rather hard to make a text-based theatre show "to work" in the current age. At the same time, maybe because I am getting old or something, I have become increasingly interested in the ancient forms of theatre, where text is recited, for example. I'd like to play around with it. When I directed *Three Sisters*, I had an idea to use the recording of the 1946, and to perform the play in such an archaic style. In *Medea* I took archaic text and placed it in the contemporary, minimalistic form. I believe it is a bit ridiculous to try to prove to someone, that the classic works can be eternal by remaking them in different ways. Sometimes it seems more productive to return to some former values, but only if it does not look like a caricature. Now is the time when all ideals have vanished, we believe in nothing. Maybe, the return to the tradition might be an attempt to revitalize the ideals? There is something in a simple fact, that a

person simply stands and speaks and the text is powerful, it "works." I as a graduate of St. Petersburg Academic School of Theatre in my productions maybe still to a great degree tend to "find a footing" in the text, by interpreting the text, being in dialogue with it, questioning it, worshipping it, arguing with it, and so forth.

Valters Silis: Text in my works usually has had one of the most important roles in the performance, if not the most important. I quite often may use contemporary plays, but I have to be in love with them in order to serve them well. However, I have found adaptations and creating original work (sometimes in collaboration, sometimes alone) much more rewarding. In this process, text and performance really can become one thing, and I feel considerably freer. When selecting already made works, I tend to feel like I have to find a way to convey to the audience my admiration towards the text. When you create an original work you have to invent the unique theatre language what would fit the idea both in the text and the way it is performed.

Klāvs Mellis: The Latvian theatre roots in the text, and it is a characteristic of my works. For now, I consciously choose to work with the newly created texts and stage adaptations of the works of prose. I am a very inexperienced director and still, largely, I have not answered for myself a question, what I should be doing as a director, therefore meddling with a text gives me a sort of consolation or safe haven. However, I have never directed a

production of an already written play. I would dearly like to try it, but so far, I cannot figure out which play should I produce and why.

Alvis Hermanis: All options have their use. The competition in the contemporary theatre are over. All tools of theatrical language are fine. Everything depends on the right usage.

How have the relationship between the theatre and the audience, the actor and the spectator changed in Latvian contemporary theatre, and how do you, as a director, evaluate your involvement in this process? What in your opinion is the ideal audience of your productions?

Elmārs Seņkovs: Nothing has changed. The audience is very diverse. The audience always demands personal treatment and respect. The changes in theatre reality consist of what we sometimes call an attitude of "I believe in" or "I don't believe in" what I see. It is as simple as that. It does not matter, how relativistic, contemporary or abstract the theatre is. Everything is much simpler- can I believe the people who are showing something to me, and is it interesting? Boring and overly conceptualized theatre means death. Theatre must simply be interesting. In all of its aspects - theme, acting, discussion, problem, narrative. The theatre in Latvia has become uniform. All of us, without even realizing it, have become boring in our own eyes. The audience, on

the contrary, has become more open and more reflective. The spectator is ready to watch even a complicated theatre form. What sort of audience are we actually talking about? About the person who has driven all the way from a country province and is looking forward to experience the wonder of the theatre, or about a person who has just indulged in a fine wine and re-read "Ulysses"? In this respect, the audience does not change. I prefer not to distinguish my audience by gender, sexual orientation, intellect, nationality, etc. My spectator is anyone, who has come to follow the progress of the story or the theme. In my opinion, the contemporary Latvian theatre is not so much involved in searching for the forms of dramatic theatre, but in searching for a more intimate discussion with the audience. How are the classical works represented today? The audience wants to see in the theatre what is happening with us in contemporary society, and what is happening with this society currently. I have always been interested in putting a well-known story in today's setting, so that it would move the contemporary viewer of all generations. Secondly, I have always been looking for new forms of drama, I have worked with Latvian original texts in order to narrate more pointedly about the current age, such as *Mii Mii Generation* in the festival Homo Novus (2015) and several productions of the Latvian National Theatre, such as *My Poor Dad* (2014), *The Boy* (2016), *Even Whales are Afraid* (2018), and *Concerning the Fathers* (2019).

Regnārs Vaivars: I have not noticed any change in the relationship between the theatre and the audience or between the actors and the viewers in Latvian contemporary theatre. Therefore, my answer is – there is no change. However, maybe it is simpler than that – maybe my plays still are not “Latvian” enough or “contemporary” enough to cause the change in our relationship. Even if the “change” means the modernized attempt to invite to the theatre some “new” audience, without losing the already existing audience (as it is more prevalent in the “repertoire theatres”), and if it means that more and more frequently the audience is directly or indirectly asked to participate in the production, in my opinion, it does not change the relationship between the individual spectator and the theatre or the actor. In my production *Two Sisters and a Girlfriend* (*Divas māšas un draudzene*, Gertrude Street Theatre, 2016) I used the audience instead of scenography. Yes, they were shy, timid, and yes, they liked it, but it did not change our relationship. The participation of the audience can change the relationship only seemingly, at best only for a short moment, during the time of the show, but it does not change the relationship in substance. This is simply one different form of the show, just another tool to entertain the spectators. Through conversations and other types of feedback I have come to believe that the less the viewer knows about me, the more he can see, feel, intuit and enjoy what actually takes place on the stage in my plays. However, the more they know about me, the more they

are watching the performance as if it were the show “of that guy Regnārs.” The best way is to watch the show instead of aiming to fulfil some expectations. I am aware, that my best plays are equally in demand, equally liked both by old people, and by maximally radically minded youth.

Inga Tropa: In my opinion, the main change in this relationship is an ever-increasing introduction and use of technology devices in theatre, as well as creation of mergers between diverse methods and branches of art. I believe that I am one of interdisciplinary directors. When I work on my production, I create this interdisciplinary space as well. For my own productions, I welcome an audience that is interested to participate in discussion and that is open to various forms and experiments.

Vladislavs Nastavševs: There is a big difference if we are talking about the large or small form productions. The most provocative plays I have created all were for the small theatre halls. The theatre companies are not always ready to take the risk by letting me in the large hall that, after all, has to be sold out. I believe that the relationship has not significantly changed. The human being in reality does not change at all, only grows older. Age gives the opportunity to re-evaluate one’s opinions, viewpoints and presumptions. My audience is ready to feel, to open emotionally, and is not so grounded in rational processing of the action on the stage. I am not appealing to the intellect. I even do not expect any special openness from my

viewers, although I do like to provoke as well. I am fascinated when a person can come to the show and see something unexpected, maybe even shocking, something that gives a sort of push to step out of one’s comfort zone. At the same time, I can calmly accept that something will remain not fully understood, because I do not feel a special need to explain everything, or to achieve an objective that the viewer should definitely understand everything. I like to leave a kind of open option, so that the viewer is free to “connect” up to the point he is able to do so. If a person has bought a ticket and is attending my production, then he or she is my audience.

Valters Silis: I think that in the last ten years, Latvian non-institutional theatres have managed to take a much more important place in the theatre scene than ever before. Moreover, it influences the theatre which is performed in such houses like Latvian National theatre, too. Many people who work for Latvian National theatre have very strong ties with independent scene. So several genres of contemporary theatre like documentary theatre, lecture performances, participatory theatre are much more in the mainstream than they were ten years ago. Therefore, I think that theatregoers are not so often talking about how this or that director has interpreted one or another classical play by Chekhov or Shakespeare, although that part of theatre is still very important. For general audience it is much easier to accept that theatre goes beyond the frames of contemporary dramatic theatre.

Klāvs Mellis: To answer this question completely literally, I believe that since the time I have been attending theatre – some fifteen years or so – nothing has fundamentally changed. The audience for the most part still sits behind the fourth wall and any experimental forms usually are perceived as marginal occurrences. If I were to think in larger scale, I have a feeling that the spectators, perhaps, are a bit more differentiated: they know what they want to see, and then they purposefully go for it. I believe that this is to a certain extent a rather positive thing, because certain artists in their creative work can afford to take a little less compromise. Usually, I try to imagine my audience to be as diversified as possible. In theory, it should be clear that, since I work in the sphere of independent theatre, I am aware, that my viewer will be, perhaps, a bit younger, more open, more liberal, and so forth. However, when I working on theatre productions, I am always trying to consider, if our grandmothers will like the show as well. I am aware that in a way it is a conformity on my part, however, at the same time, I truly want to bring delight to my own grandmothers.

Alvis Hermanis. The audience is not reading books as much as before, and they have a different sense of time, not as it used to be. The viewers are becoming more and more impatient.

Are there any taboo subjects in Latvian theatre? Which taboo subjects would you shy away from discussing or which of them would you be reluctant to address?

Elmārs Senkovs: The only reason that one should talk about the taboo subjects is to educate. That is all. The taboo subject is any subject that touches the values and interests of another community. In the play any currently hot topic – be it feminism, affiliation with some ethnic community and so forth – sometimes turns into a present-day conjuncture. Sometimes I become perplexed by it, because many directors are paying attention to it solely because it is currently a hot topic. Today in Latvia, normally there are no taboo topics. We can talk about anything we want. The question – are these truly current issues for the contemporary viewer? Personally, I do not have any taboos; therefore I am not very interested to distinguish such a category at all. On second thought, the only taboo subject would be all things that go against liberal values and call into question democracy. Right now, I do not see the reason for it. I would not like to denigrate any public figure; I do not want to talk about the hot topics that many people are already discussing. Because many people are doing it very well already, for me it would become boring. Of course, there are uneasy topics in the society, and it is regrettable, that some directors take advantage of it in order to gain attention and to make a cheap marketing campaign.

This is my phobia – lest I myself step on the same rake as they have done. Sometimes I see white as white. And it cannot be black. But we try to accept the fact that white can be black. I see theatre in a poetical level, rather than a social level. Although my plays had addressed social problems, I attempt to find artistic generalization for them.

Regnārs Vaivars: Yes, such subjects definitely exist. This would be, for example, paedophilia and, definitely, Latvian symbols portrayed from any unusual angle, because for the oppressing majority of people it feels like blasphemy. I think that, if it was necessary for my narrative and I could not get by without it, I most likely would be willing to cross the boundaries of any of the taboo subjects. However, I have never been fascinated by the taboos, if for no other reason than for the simple fact that, when creating the productions, I very frequently tend to unearth or come upon a taboo even in the most seemingly innocent topics. Sometimes it even comes as a surprise to myself.

Inga Tropa: In Latvian theatres (as well as in society), taboo subjects still exist, or there are the topics that are uneasy, unpopular and that go beyond the generally accepted norms of opinions, which we are not yet completely ready to address from the alternative viewpoints, because in such cases one has to confess too much about society's collectively and individually held lies and / or persistent narrow-minded attitudes. In my latest production, *The Bride of the Grass Snake* (New Riga Theatre, 2019) I touched upon some

taboo subjects that are still sensitive in our society: Firstly, I portrayed the family with disabled children, that can form a complicated and difficult family pattern, potentially leading to complications and psychological trauma in the relationship between a man and a woman. Secondly, I dared to uncover woman's awareness of her internal psychological world, her ego, her sexuality, and her choice to follow her calling still to this day in our contemporary society can cause inadequate violence from her peers, since it destroys some imagined constructs, that relegates a young woman to second- or third-tier roles in the overall scheme. I would not undertake creating a taboo subject that I myself had not first meticulously researched and had not first become acquainted with the diverse opinions about this specific issue. Rather than didactically announcing only one single stance, I find it to be important to open the question a bit and to activate further thinking processes, leaving room for a free choice.

Vladislavs Nastavševs: I have taboo subjects. One of them is politics. I am not making a political theatre. Possibly some would think that *The Lake of Dreams* (*Cerību ezers*, New Riga Theatre, 2015) might be interpreted as a political play. However, this is precisely why I chose to use a very personally focused approach to the subject, in order to preclude any sort of generalization. Politics largely is manipulation, and I try to stay out of it. Moreover, my taboo is to pontificate or moralize about what is right or wrong, how

a person should or should not live. Definitely, to follow these trends is a taboo for me. For example, a switch between conservative and liberal values, fluctuating alongside some sort of ideological fashion. I don't care to please or to annoy anyone, I simply do not feel any need for it.

Valters Silis: I don't think there is any taboo for me. Sometimes there is question of finding the right collaborators, who would have adequate expertise in certain subject I would like to tackle. Working in documentary theatre it has been important to make a distinction among private and public people. Sometimes story is great and I choose to change names so that it would not be public knowledge to whom these events happened. At the same time if the performance is about public politics I want to take responsibility and not change their names. This implies that I haven't invented anything. The stage uncovers what actually happened or shows my genuine thoughts about particular politicians' actions. For me it is important to take responsibility what is going on stage, even if we are doing crazy and irresponsible things on it.

Klāvs Mellis: I believe that there are no real taboo subjects in Latvian theatre. Rather, maybe it is a kind of internal sense, that it is bad taste to talk about the current issues too directly. As a result, in my opinion, we do not have a significant number of truly social theatre performances – any socio-political issue in the play eventually acquires some sort of "poetical generalization." Perhaps, we are simply

afraid of being didactic and preaching too much. Sometimes this fear is well founded, but other times it becomes a kind of internal censorship – to use the concept in its worst possible meaning. This, I believe, is a characteristic of my productions as well. I cannot imagine that there would be a real taboo subject for me.

Alvis Hermanis: I would not stir theatre arts and social projects in the same common porridge. However, it is clearly visible, where one starts and the other ends. Since the Living Theatre Company produced the play *Paradise Now*, where the actors were copulating with the audience, the concept of taboo in the world theatre is no longer a hot issue. That happened fifty years ago. If anyone feels troubled by such problems in Latvian theatre, then this should simply be repeated – to achieve finally some peace and quiet to then to be able to proceed and address what is essential.

Is there any reason to discuss some special challenges or problems that arise from using the large hall (stage) productions in contemporary theatre, or is it merely a myth? How has your personal creative experience changed your opinion about the director's options of creative expression in different stage spatial settings?

Elmārs Senkovs: The horrible myth about the large halls has been created by the grim capitalism and scant

financial subsidies. Theatre is forever forced to make both ends meet. This is the perpetual issue arising first in the conversation between the directors and managers of the theatre. Which works should be performed in the large hall? Certainly, it does not alter the artistic interests. This is a question, whether the chosen topic is too marginal, resulting in diminished numbers of viewers. This has always been the hot topic for managers, not for directors. I am more and more attracted by the large halls. I am not afraid of them. However, I fear, whether my work is worth the toil that other people have put into it, so that it would be cost-effective both financially as well as mentally. Naturally, my ideal stage hall is the one that can seat three to four hundred spectators. There are no such theatre halls in Latvia. As time passes, my ambitions are growing, the thought takes flight and that requires large space. I have had such an opportunity. Right now, it is not important, whether I make my play in the basement, in the so-called *black box*, or in the large hall. If I am convinced about the subject matter, the premises don't scare me.

Regnārs Vaivars: in the great hall, the face of the actor is his entire body. This is the main difference. In addition, based on this, the director must work accordingly, not only with the actor, but also with the rest of the components of the production. One could say, of course, that both the large and small hall theatre are and remain theatre, but the one could say the same about men or women's basketball...

Inga Tropa: There are some problems. They arise if one does not understand the rules. Each of the forms are governed by different rules of the game. One must learn how to master them and how to manoeuvre within them. It really does not minimize the creativity and the specific idea that you want to express in your work of art – rather, it only channels them into specific set of rules. However, one can even experiment with the rules. Of course, the experiment might not always end up brilliant. Moreover, I believe that such experiments are necessary, in order to promote the common creative development. The second problem – the large form theatre production requires a much larger team and a more complicated scheme. The stage director is not always capable of leading this process adequately, because the director is merely a tiny screw in the large scheme and other internal processes, while the creative idea dissolves in the complex tangle of relationships. I am a type of director for whom it is necessary to express oneself alternately in various forms, because it develops some qualities in me that will be useful in the next productions. The never-ending fluidity helps me to maintain a sharper vision and more nuanced sensitivity – that is of great importance for a creative individual. The creative energy inside me cannot be contained only within the framework of a single form.

Vladislavs Nastavševs: Right now, I would like to experiment with the large hall. A great example of it was my *Five Songs by Heart* (*Piecas dzies-*

mas pēc atmiņas, 2020) in the Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre. Of course, the large halls always demand more attention, the responsibility for the risk that the theatre is assuming, and this imposes restrictions on the director. The story is not so much about the volume of the hall, as it is about the side factors – the theatre troupe, management, tasks, the opinions about who can and who cannot do something, what the people will buy and what they will not buy. The large halls of the theatre are perceived as a production for masses, and it is a bit sad. If one does not pacify or adjust to some formulated expectations, the large hall always imposes a level of pressure. It is strange talking about the creative expression on various spatial platforms – I had a conversation with a theatre director, who said that they would hire me as a permanent employee, because I am not “a universal director,” because I do not produce, for example, productions for children. I must confess, that the very concept “universal director” somewhat unnerves me. I like chamber settings and small halls. However, if I had a chance to choose, I would definitely make productions for the large hall.

Valters Silis: It is really the responsibility of the artist not to limit the range of choices based on perceived notions as to what would be adequate for a certain theatre or stage. However, the architecture of the space or scene has enormous influence on the production. A big part of the work for the director is to make sure that every audience member can see

key moments in the performance. In classical black box theatre, you don't have to worry about that. Unfortunately, there is no black box stage in Riga that would be a proper amphitheatre setting for the audience. Thus, you always have to think about the way you work with the space. Big stage of National theatre is a classical proscenium stage. If you want to use the entire space on the stage, you have to think about the audience who sees the performance from sides; and what is lost or gained from their field of view. There are ideas that work better for smaller audiences. Sometimes you have an idea for such a piece that will be interesting for big audiences, but I have had situations when, after a premiere, I understood that a piece which I have made for the small stage would have worked on the big stage as well or even better. Sometimes it is the other way around. Being creative or daring is not limited by the place for which you make the performance. At least for me.

Klāvs Mellis: I have had no experience with large halls as of yet, therefore I couldn't comment on this.

Alvis Hermanis: To direct a production for a large hall and a small hall are two different professional occupations. The small hall can be filled with friends, acquaintances of acquaintances, and critics. To sell tickets to several hundred people every night is completely another case. A director can, of course, express his creativity equally well in both cases. However, it would have to be done in a completely different way. As Nekrošius

(Eimuntas Nekrošius, a distinguished Lithuanian theatre director (1952–2018) – editor's note) once said: "the large hall demands large ideas."

How does Latvian theatre reflect global trends or their contexts? How do you perceive the relationship between the global and local trends in Latvian theatre processes collectively and in your productions individually, and what should be changed about this relationship?

Elmārs Senkovs: To tell you the truth, we are still stuck in tackling our own national problems. We are addressing issues that Europe has already exhausted. Our society and our audience are not yet ready to watch complicated post-dramatic works. Why? It is hard to tell. Maybe it relates to the fact that we are developing together with our audience. As long as our press and mass media in their headlines will write about the cabbage-patches and who has set fire to last year's grass in the Dobeles province, we will never be able to tackle large global problems in our theatre. Because the audience truly does not care what happens in the world. The viewer is poorly informed. Take a look at "Panorāma" (the main evening news broadcast in Latvia – editor's note) and BBC news. There is a difference. Other nations follow the world events much more closely. Because they are large nations and can influence big geopolitics. Regrettably, Latvia, as hard as it may be to admit, does not have large

influence in the global situation. However, our spirit is not small. Therefore, we spend so much time looking at our internal problems. Latvian community that keeps track of the contemporary theatre trends is very small. I advocate that we should collaborate more closely with the European theatres. I believe that state-subsidized professional theatres should create collaborative projects with other theatres, in order to intensify and speed up the blood circulation of our theatres.

Regnārs Vaivars: When I start choosing the subject based on its global or local principles, I catch myself calculating benefits, and I don't like it. Therefore, it would be unethical for me to talk about this issue in the context of Latvian theatre. For the most part, I make the plays about myself, and it is already a rather global localism.

Inga Tropa: Such relationships exist; however, the greater emphasis is placed on the internal processes of an individual, and on the local processes. Only a small percent of the productions reflect on the global current events. In a way, it is naturally very human to concentrate on ourselves as individuals. In my work I also tend to concentrate more on the microcosm (the individual), because I believe that in this way I can also uncover and understand macrocosm.

Vladislavs Nastavševs: Sure, it is cool to be convertible, not to feel any boundaries between the local and the global. When working on my productions, I likely do not reflect about it in any detail. I believe I am mostly a lo-

cal director. Latvia is my home, and for the most part, I create productions for the people who live here. If the theatre language that I use can address larger audiences, then it is all very well, but I do not purposefully think about it. In any case, it does not pertain to the specific form or the selected subject matter, because the local flavour is a rather specific cultural environment, language, history, mentality. It is important to realize with whom I am in a dialogue. I usually deal with personal experience or memories and Latvian audience, and this is how the local aspect comes forth even if I am working with a topic that might be a little bit unknown for the Latvian mentality, such as in my production *Travellers by Sea and Land* (*Peldošie – ceļojošie*, New Riga Theatre, 2014). The more intimate the approach in staging process, the better the result, at least I believe so.

Valters Siliis: I think that this is a problem in Latvia. We tend to be local in the subject matter concerning today's politics. There are some very good exceptions, but overall there is certainly room in theatre to care more about what is happening outside our country. I think that audiences care about these affairs much more than theatre makers are aware of it.

Klāvs Mellis: This is a very complicated question, because we can talk about the global and local aspects both in the context of a production's theme and form, as well as when trying to understand how we comprehend the theatre as media in its entirety. In my opinion, as far as the content

goes, the Latvian theatre first and foremost addresses the so-called “issues of general humanity.” Next, they grapple with the “local problems,” and the “global aspects” come last. I like theatre that is both markedly local and meant for the consumption of the local audience, as well as a theatre that is so heavily local that it already becomes interesting and in a way even exotic for the foreign audiences. I like theatre that is convertible and multi-cultural as well. I truly do not have any opinion about which of these strategies should be preferred. I believe that it is very important to know what is happening outside your own home-stand, but, at the same time, I am not so convinced that there is much sense to follow mechanically the tendencies that are present in the contemporary theatre of Western Europe. However, sometimes there might be a good reason to do so.

Alvis Hermanis: I do not know how it is in other theatres, but I have always worked based on the creed – maximally local, but in global context. This holds true in the New Riga Theatre, as well as in my productions abroad.

What do you understand by the concept “authenticity” within the interpretation of contemporary theatre?

Elmārs Seņkovs: The authenticity in theatre resides in truth, whether the people on the stage remain true to everything they are doing. When an actor merges with the thinking or theme

of his protagonist, we feel authenticity. The main task of the director is to find each actor’s “switch of genuineness.” To find an approach, that will help an actor to pulsate with thought and energy. Then the entire ambience and audience will pulsate as well. This is the case, if we are talking about the theatre in its academic and dramatic aspect. If we were to talk about the current day reality – then I must confess we must do just about everything possible to make the contemporary viewer not to pull out his smartphone and to check his Instagram. If the spectator picks up his phone, this means that the reality for him is not exciting and he is bored. In addition, this is a director’s fault. If the audience forgets about the smartphones, then the director has done everything right, and the action on the scene is “for real”.

Regnārs Vaivars: Theatre, in my opinion, is a very simple imitation of life. Therefore, in theatre I usually do not seek the true, the natural, and the genuine. More frequently, I am searching for the theatre that lies behind the genuine, the natural, the authentic, the realistic and the naturalistic.

Inga Tropa: The authenticity has always captivated me, and I like to play with it and to use it in my works, for example, in the production *Ladies* (*Dāmas*, Theatre TT, 2016). However, I (as well as the audience, hopefully) have always been interested and fascinated by the capacity of theatrical art to create such a manipulation, that even the most theatrical expression later turns into something truly genuine and alive. I have come to realize

many times that real life is much more like theatre, and the things we create in the theatre are but a modest child’s play in comparison.

Vladislavs Nastavševs: Overall, it is a difficult question. The question itself contains a dose of paradox, because theatre in a manner is essentially fake, and make-believe. Art in its very foundation is not and cannot be real, and there is nothing wrong about it. One could say that my productions are personal, and therefore genuine, but we are not talking about that. Rather, authenticity is something connected with perception. I want to believe in what I do. For me, the authenticity in theatre after all, means to experience emotional stirring. Probably this currently is not in vogue. Nonetheless, the further we advance in the sphere of technology, the more we are yearning for emotional excitement. For example, during the show I like to sit somewhere in the far corner and observe the audience. Sometimes I am moved to tears when I see a spark of interest, if I see, that the viewer “plugs into” the events on the stage and has a reaction to it. The emotional stirring is something that can foster a connection between strangers on some other, immaterial level. What is considered real differs for each individual person. The genuineness in an actor’s performance, and his / her capacity not to pretend, but to be in the play, is a characteristic of the especially talented performers. Nevertheless, one should not forget that there is an option to perform “for real”, and it is quite usual in the contemporary theatre, because it makes art overly social, and

that in my opinion is simply madness. I believe that theatre in its own right is a rather elite form of art, therefore there is no need to pretend that theatre in some way is trying to show social responsibility, or trying to make the world better and more egalitarian. Authenticity in a vacuum becomes problematic, if not impossible. At the same time, the task of the director is to create an illusion of authenticity, by using different conditions and tools offered by the theatre as a form of art.

Valters Silis: I don’t worry about believability or realness of the action in the theatre production. I think about the meaning that produced by the action in the theatre work. The event of the theatre being played and watched is very real. It is always particularly important to think about how this event will be organized. What kind of live experience will you create for your audience? The rules of the performance, the world that is created for this certain performative event, which will have a certain effect on all the participants is the reality I have to think about every day when I rehearse a new performance.

Klāvs Mellis: Recently, I read an article about present-day pornography. According to the article, twenty or thirty years ago the absurd and cliché plots featuring a “sexy plumber” dominated porn. Nowadays the most popular porn is the so-called “gonzo porn,” where the viewer in principle all the time is confronted with details and means of expression, that consciously destroy any sense that you are watching a fictional narrative. In a

word, contemporary porn actors constantly shove in our faces not that they are “sexy plumbers”, but that they are actors, who are aware that they are being on camera, and this is the way the viewer is given the sense of authenticity, which, of course, is not less constructed and illusory, only the method is different. I perceive the authenticity in theatre in a similar fashion. At the same time I believe, that the relationship between reality and fiction – both in terms of content and form – is the

most interesting aspect that the theatre can have.

Alvis Hermanis: It seems that in the future theatre, the physical presence will become even more important than it had been until now, and, for example, the utilization of video in the theatre plays will be regarded as tasteless, to say the least, or even as tactless. Theatre will be like a zoo, where the public will come to look at live real human beings.

STATE THEATRE

Latvian National Theatre



Address:

Kronvalda bulvāris 2, Riga
www.teatris.lv, info@teatris.lv

Founded:

Financing sources:

55% state dotation
45% self-financing

Stages:

Large hall – 709 seats
Actors' hall – 70–90 seats
LMT New hall – 90–120 seats

Productions per season:

Artistic profile: Repertory theatre focused on contemporary interpretations of world and Latvian classics and original drama. Strong, well-established troupe of professional actors, who regularly appear among the best actors of the year etc. The mission of the theatre is to be a modern art institution addressing a wide-ranged audience of different social strata, to offer top-quality productions, to cultivate the national sense of belonging by emphasizing the plays by Latvian authors and go in line with European culture activities. One of the main tasks of the theatre is to promote Latvian original plays; therefore each season is started with a new production by a Latvian playwright. Theatre

organizes the National Competition of Plays. LNT has a bunch of nominations and awards in *Spēlmaņu nakts* (Performer's Night – a yearly national theatre award) with 4 Grand Prix in last decade: in 2014 for by Elmārs Seņkovs *Ezeriņš* (*Ezeriņš*, 2014), in 2015 – for *Antigone* (dir. by Elmārs Seņkovs), in 2016 for (dir. by Vladislavs Nastavševs) and in 2019 for *Pūt, vējiņi!* (*Blow, the Wind!*, dir. by Elmārs Seņkovs).

Stage directors: Edmunds Freibergs, Valdis Lūriņš, Indra Roga, Viesturs Kairiņš, Valters Silis, Elmārs Seņkovs, Vladislavs Nastavševs, Kirill Serebrennikov (Russia), Ināra Slucka

Most important productions 2010–2020:

- G. Buechner *Woyzeck*, dir. by Kirill Serebrennikov, 2012
- F. Ebb / J. Kander *Cabaret*, dir. by Indra Roga, 2015
- Rainis *Uguns un nakts* (*Fire and night*), dir. by Viesturs Kairiņš, 2015
- M. Bērziņš *Svina garša* (*The taste of lead*), dir. by Valters Silis, 2016
- F. Garcia Lorca *Blood wedding*, dir. by Vladislavs Nastavševs, 2016
- Rainis *Pūt, vējiņi!* (*Blow, the Wind!*) dir. by Elmārs Seņkovs, 2018

STATE THEATRE

Daile Theatre



Address:

Brīvības iela 75, Riga
www.dailesteatris.lv
pasts@dailesteatris.lv
+371 67270463

Founded:

Financing sources:

42% state dotation
58% self-financing

Stages:

Large hall – up to 980 seats
Small hall – 198 seats
Chamber hall – 83 seats

Productions per season:

Artistic profile: Daile Theatre – a theatre with the most acclaimed history of director's theatre in Latvian culture, cultivated by Eduards Smiļģis, its founder, actor and director for more than forty years. In 2020, Daile Theatre celebrates its centenary. From the very beginnings, the repertory of Daile Theatre focuses on world classics – Shakespeare, Schiller, Ibsen, Rainis and contemporary plays by the most talented authors. Currently, Daile Theatre is the largest professional Repertory theatre in Latvia with three stages. The Chamber hall and Small hall serves for zoomed psychological

production and experiments, meanwhile the Large hall of nearly 100 seats aims to satisfy large audiences with dramas, comedies, tragedies, musical performances, children's performances and concerts. The style of Daile Theatre has always been different from so called natural-psychological style theatres. The reality of art prevails in the house welcoming the most talented artists of their time.

Stage directors: Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, Laura Groza-Ķibere, Alexander Morfov (Bulgaria), Jan Willem van den Bosch (UK)

Most important productions 2010–2020:

- P. Shaffer *Amadeus*, dir. by Willem van den Bosch, 2011
- N. Erdman. *Finita la comedia!*, dir. by Alexander Morfov, 2012
- K. Lācis / J. Elsbergs *Onegin* (musical), dir. by Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, 2013
- N. Dear *Frankenstein*, dir. by Laura Groza-Ķibere, 2015
- K. Kessey *Someone flew over the cuckoo's nest*, dir. by Alexander Morfov, 2015

New Riga Theatre

JAUNĀIS RĪGAS TEĀTRIS
Miera iela 58a pie Dzemdību nama

www.jrt.lv
67280765

Address:

Miera iela 58a, Rīga
www.jrt.lv, info@jrt.lv

Founded:

1992

Financing sources:

40% state dotation
55% self-financing
5% other financing

Stages:

Large hall – 301 seats
Small hall – 250 seats

Productions per season:

8

Artistic profile: The New Riga Theatre is a state repertory theatre that provides innovative art corresponding both in its content and form to the requirements of the independently-thinking contemporary spectator. The artistic principles of The New Riga Theatre include highly professional, ethic and aesthetic quality. The theatre has an intelligent and attractive repertory of high quality focused on a modern, educated and socially active audience. The New Riga Theatre was founded in 1992. In 1997 the leadership of the theatre was taken over by its present artistic director Alvis Hermanis. The New Riga Theatre is located in the former tobacco factory

building at the creative Miera street district, while its' historical building in the center of the city has been renovated. The New Riga Theatre has performed at major festivals around the world, including Festival d'Avignon, The Edinburgh International Festival, Wiener Festwochen, Salzburger Festspiele, Holland Festival, BITEF, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, and, to date, has toured to more than 200 towns and cities in 40 countries, both in Europe and overseas.

Stage director:

Alvis Hermanis

Most important productions 2010-2020:

- *Ziedonis un Visums (Ziedonis and the Universe)*, dir. by Alvis Hermanis, 2010
- I. Goncharov *Oblomov*, dir. Alvis Hermanis, 2011
- Brodsky / Baryshnikov, dir. Alvis Hermanis, 2015
- *Vēstures izpētes komisija (History Research Commission)* dir. by Alvis Hermanis, 2019
- *Baltais helikopters (The White Helicopter)*, dir. Alvis Hermanis, 2019

Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre



Address:

Kaļķu ielā 16, Rīga
www.mct.lv, mct@mct.lv
+371 67 22 46 60

Founded:

1883

Financing sources:

50% state dotation
50% self-financing

Stages:

Large hall – 533 seats
Small hall – 50 seats
Experimental stage – 50 seats
Alternative space Kvartirnik – 40 seats
New venue platform "Andrejsala" – 100 seats

Productions per season:

8

Artistic profile: Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre is the oldest Russian dramatic theatre outside Russia. The repertory consists of Russian and world classics as well as contemporary plays. Theatre aims to support the widest range of artistic diversity. The audience can enjoy deeply social and psychologic productions, musical performances and creative experiments, as well as academic traditional productions. Theatre often goes on tour and takes part in different festivals. In summer 2010, the reconstruction of the building was finally completed welcoming the audience in renovated

premises with historical ambience. In 2006, the theatre retrieved its historical name "Riga Russian Theatre" and obtained the right to add the name of Mikhail Chekhov, actor, stage director and pedagogue who worked in Riga 1932-1934. Since 2018, the administrative director is Dana Bjorka, producer and actress, in the autumn of the same year Sergey Golomazov, Russian stage director and Distinguished Artist of Russian Federation from Moscow was appointed as the artistic director of the theatre.

Stage directors: Sergey Golomazov, Viesturs Kairiņš, Elmārs Seņkovs, Vladislavs Nastavševs, Alla Sigalova, Ruslan Kudashov

Most important productions 2010-2020:

- *Granyonka*, dir. by Elmārs Seņkovs, 2011
- A. Scherbak *Tango with Strok*, dir. by Igor Konyaev, 2012
- W. Shakespeare *King Lear*, dir. by Viesturs Kairiņš, 2017
- A. Baricco *1900. A legend of a pianist*, dir. by Sergey Golomazov, 2017
- I. Turgenev *Mumu*, dir. by Viesturs Kairiņš, 2018

Latvian Puppet Theatre



Address:

K. Barona iela 16/18, Rīga
www.lelluteatris.lv
info@lelluteatris.lv
 +371 67285418, +371 67281402

Founded: 1944

Financing sources:

60% state dotation
 35% self-financing
 5% other financing

Stages:

Large hall – 230 seats
 Small hall (blackbox) – 80 seats
 Museum hall – 50 seats

Productions per season: 10

Artistic profile: The mission of Latvian Puppet Theatre consists of two guidelines – high-quality repertory for children's audience of different age and professional development of diverse puppetry art. Therefore, last decade in Latvian Puppet Theatre focuses on involvement of local and international guest stage directors,

who work together with the creative team of the house polishing technical and artistic skills and aiming to achieve wide-ranged mastery in visual aesthetics and content created in close cooperation.

Stage directors: Ģirts Šolis, Duda Paiva, Edgars Kaufelds, Dmitrijs Petrenko, Vija Blūzma, Māris Koristins, Valters Silis

Most important productions 2010-2020:

- E. Kaestner *Lottie and Lisa*, dir. by Ģirts Šolis, 2012
- A. Lindgren *Ronya, the robber's daughter*, dir. by Valdis Pavlovskis, 2013
- H. K. Andersen *The ugly duckling*, dir. by Dmitrijs Petrenko, 2015
- Rainis *Zelta zirgs (The golden horse)*, dir. by Duda Paiva, 2017
- *Pusilvēki (Half people)*, dir. by Edgars Kaufelds, 2019

Daugavpils Theatre



Address:

Rīgas iela 22a, Daugavpils
www.daugavpilsteatris.lv
 +371 65426321

Founded: 1988

Financing sources:

71% state dotation
 8% municipality funding
 16% self-financing
 5% other revenue

Stages:

Large hall – 550 seats
 Stage of the Large hall – up to 150 seats
 Experimental stage – up to 60 seats

Productions per season: 7

Artistic profile: Daugavpils Theatre is located in Latgallia, a multicultural and historically multinational region of Latvia that borders with three different countries – Lithuania, Russia and Belorussia offering a fruitful soil for unique creativity. The multicultural environment makes Daugavpils Theatre a striking example of integration providing productions in three languages – Latvian, Russian and Latgallian. The creative teams consist of stage directors, actors and soloists from Latvia and guest artists from neighbouring countries.

The repertory of Daugavpils Theatre includes the plays of Latvian, Russian

and world classics, musicals, operettas, operas, plastic dramas and post-dramatic experiments. Currently, theatre aims to strengthen international relations establishing the cooperation with several theatre festivals in Lithuania, Belorussia, Russia and Kazakhstan. In addition, the cooperation agreement has been signed with E. Vahtangov Moscow Academic theatre in Russia.

Stage directors: Oļegs Šapošņikovs, Georgijs Surkovs, Juris Jonelis, Paula Pļavniece, Lucyna Sosnowska (Poland), Dž. Dž. Džilindžers

Most important productions 2010-2020:

- *Tuvība (Closeness)* dance performance, choreographer Irina Saveļjeva, 2015
- E. Schwartz *The naked king* dir. by Oļegs Šapošņikovs, 2016
- W. Shakespeare *Hamlet* dir. by Oļegs Šapošņikovs, 2016
- J. Kļava *Jubileja '98 (Jubilee '98)* dir. by Paula Pļavniece, 2017
- N. Gogol, M. Zile *Revidents Sylagolā (The government inspector at Sylagols)*, dir. by Oļegs Šapošņikovs, 2018

Valmiera Drama Theatre



Address:

Lāčplēša iela 4, Valmiera
www.vdt.lv

Founded:

Financing sources:

53% state dotation
28% self-financing
6% municipality financing
13% other financing

Stages:

Large hall – 395 seats
Round hall – up to 145 seats
LMT Mansard – 101 seats
Experimental spaces under the Large hall stage – 62 seats

Productions per season:

Artistic profile: Valmiera Drama Theatre is the only professional theatre in Vidzeme region and ensures availability of professional performing arts for different target groups contributing to the decentralization of cultural processes in Latvia. Fifty years ago with young stage directors of the time – Oļģerts Kroders and Māra Ķimele, Valmiera Drama Theatre was the incubator of the contemporary theatre in Latvia. Today, it keeps the line of brave experiments and democratic attitude towards every form of performing arts. The repertoire focuses on contemporary versions of classics and Latvian original plays. Valmiera

Theatre offers large-scale dramas, comedies and children and youth performances, but at the same time offers intimate psychologic theatre and chamber-style labs. Taking care of development of new and creative ideas in the context of local cultural environment, has led to interdisciplinary Valmiera Summer Theatre festival.

Stage directors: Oļģerts Kroders, Felikss Deičs, Mārtiņš Eihe, Māra Ķimele, Varis Brasla, Inese Mičule, Indra Roga, Jānis Znotiņš, Reinis Suhanovs, Pēteris Krilovs, Viesturs Meikšāns

Most important productions 2010-2020:

- F. Schiller *Mary Stewart* dir. by Oļģerts Kroders, 2010
- E. Virza *Plūdi un saulgrieži Straumēni skaņās (Flood and solstice in Straumēni sounds)* dir. by Viesturs Meikšāns
- M. Bulgakov *Zoya's apartment*, dir. by Indra Roga, 2012
- R. Blaumanis *Raudupiete* dir. by Elmārs Seņkovs, 2013
- R. Blaumanis *Pazudušais dēls (The prodigal son)* dir. by Reinis Suhanovs, 2017
- Valdis Staburaga *bērni (The children of Staburags)*, dir. by Jānis Znotiņš, 2017

Latvian National Opera and Ballet



Address:

Aspazijas bulvāris 3, Rīga
www.opera.lv, info@opera.lv

Founded:

Financing sources:

65% state dotation
35% self-financing

Stages:

Large hall – 946 seats
New hall – 241 seats

Productions per season:

Artistic profile: The Latvian National Opera and Ballet is an internationally competitive arts centre aiming to develop and support the creative process, cultural enrichment and educational functions. LNOB strives for excellence in its opera and ballet productions, as well as provides all of society with access to high-quality artistry, promotes creativity and public education.

The company has operated under numerous authorities and regimes since October 15, 1918. Today, LNOB continues to maintain its rich traditions, by fulfilling its mission to educate on culture and the arts within Latvia, and by representing our country around the world.

The LNOB has always staged most influential opera and ballet masterpieces, as well as modern examples of the genre. Great importance is always

placed on the creation and staging of new Latvian operas and ballets, thus contributing to the development of the genre in Latvia.

World renown opera stars such as Elīna Garanča, Kristīne Opolais, Marina Rebeka, Maija Kovaļevska, Inese Galante, Aleksandrs Antoņenko and Egils Siliņš, and conductor Andris Nelsons started their professional careers at LNO. World-famous ballet stars Mikhail Baryshnikov and Māris Liepa also started their careers here.

Most important productions 2010-2020:

- Richard Wagner *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, opera, cond. Cornelius Meister, dir. by Stefan Herheim, Viesturs Kairiņš, 2013
- Kristaps Pētersons *Mikhail and Mikhail Play Chess*, opera, cond. Ainārs Rubiķis, Atvars Lakstīgala, dir. by Viesturs Meikšāns, 2014
- Alexander Glazunov *Raymonda*, ballet, chor. Aivars Leimanis, cond. Jānis Liepiņš, 2015
- Juris Karlsons *Antonija #Silmači*, ballet, chor. Aivars Leimanis, cond. Mārtiņš Ozoliņš, 2018
- Francis Poulenc *Dialogues des Carmélites*, opera, cond. Mārtiņš Ozoliņš, dir. by Vincent Boussard, 2019

Liepāja Theatre



Address:

Teātra iela 4, Liepāja
www.liepajasteatris.lv

Founded: 1907

Financing sources:

60,2% Liepāja municipality dotation
39,2% self-financing
0,6% co-financing by State Culture Capital Foundation

Stages:

Large hall – 468 seats
Experimental stage in premises of the concert hall "The Great Amber" – 90-105 seats

Productions per season: 8

Artistic profile: Founded 1907, Liepāja theatre is the oldest professional Latvian theatre. The building of the theatre was constructed for the needs of German theatre, but in 1918 was assigned to Latvian theatre. Theatre has a well-established troupe of 24 top level professional actors. Liepāja theatre offers wide-ranged repertory, average 20 productions including all kind of genres from classics to contemporary plays. Liepāja Theatre has strong inherited tradition of musical theatre and musicals. Theatre takes

part in international festivals and is critically acclaimed often welcoming both local stage directors and guest artists to be part of the creative platform in Liepāja.

Stage directors: Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, Sergey Zemlyansky, Elmārs Seņkovs, Konstantin Bogomolov, Laura Groza-Ķibere, Regnārs Vaivars, Viesturs Meikšāns, Valdis Lūriņš

Most important productions 2010-2020:

- G. Grekov *Hanana* dir. by Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, 2010
- K. Lācis / J. Elsbergs / E. Mamaja *Pūt, vējiņi! (Blow, the wind!)*, based on play by Rainis and Latvian folk songs, dir. by Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, 2011
- *Stavangera (Pulp People)* based on play by Marina Krapivina, dir. by Konstantin Bogomolov, 2012
- N. Gogol *The marriage* dir. by Sergey Zemlyansky, 2017
- K. Lācis / R. Vaivars *Purva bridējs ugunī (Marsh crosser in the fire)* based on works by Rūdolfs Blaumanis, dir. by Regnārs Vaivars, 2019

Dirty Deal Teatro



Address:

Talsu iela 1, Āgenskalns, Rīga
www.dirtydealteatro.lv
info@dirtydealteatro.lv
pr@dirtydealteatro.lv
+371 20119550

Founded: 2007

Financing sources:

49% self-financing
42% project financing (State Culture Capital Foundation)
3% municipality financing
6% international financing

Stages:

Blackbox – up to 80 seats
White hall – 50 seats, site-specific

Productions per season: 6-8

Artistic profile: Dirty Deal Teatro (DDT) is a professional non-governmental theatre that brings together experienced masters and young artists to offer a new, contemporary theatre experience to the audience. The aim of the theatre is to stimulate the artists to seek and find their own handwriting. The repertory of DDT consists of Latvian original plays mostly focused on today's life in society and dealing with uncomfortable past from a distance. The theatre offers production

for children and youth in order to bring contemporary performing arts to these audiences uncovering the role of art in the intellectual and emotional development. DDT encourages the creative development of artists and offers the contents highly appreciated by critics and general audience.

Stage directors: Krista Burāne, Inga Gaile, Andris Kalnozols, Mārcis Lācis, Vladislavs Nastavševs, Paula Pļavniece, Valters Sīlis, Inga Tropa

Most important productions 2010-2020:

- I. Bunin *Mitjas mīlestība (Mitya's love)* dir. by Vladislavs Nastavševs, 2010
- J. Balodis *Visi mani prezidenti (All my presidents)* dir. by Valters Sīlis, 2011
- M. Gricmanis *Būt nacionālistam (To be a nationalist)* dir. by Valters Sīlis, 2017
- J. Joņevs, A. Konste *Zvēriņā mīla (Beasty love)* dir. by Mārcis Lācis, 2017
- J. Kļava *Dvēseļu utenis (Flee market of souls)* dir. by Inga Tropa, 2017

Gertrūdes ielas teātris (Gertrude Street Theatre)



Address:

Gertrūdes iela 101a, Rīga
www.git.lv, git@git.lv
+371 2202 0616

Founded: 2009

Financing sources:

45% self-financing
55% project financing (State Culture Capital Foundation and other Foundations)

Stages:

Studio theatre – up to 120 seats
Rehearsal hall – studio for rehearsals and residencies

Productions per season: 4–6

Artistic profile: For now, the hall at Gertrudes street 101a has gone from hosting events to becoming one of the most influential independent theatres in Latvia and affecting change in the country's theatre system. In this time GIT has produced and co-produced 48 new productions and held guest performances in 17 countries. Artists from various performing arts backgrounds – theatre, dance, and music – come together in a total of over 100 events each season. Each drawing from their field and complementing one another, they create and develop theatre as an experiential medium that encourages spectators to embrace the challenge when encountering the unknown.

The collaboration between GIT and artists is established and based on a shared belief in the value of creative work and the crossing of borders – we support and encourage new impulses and ideas to aid artistic growth. A group of actively engaged partners helps strengthen GIT as a platform for current trends in contemporary theatre in Riga. In this task we equally value our companions – thoughtful and empathetic spectators who want to explore the diverse world of the performing arts.

Stage directors: Mārtiņš Eihe, Andrejs Jarovojš, Arnita Jaunsubrēna, Vladislavs Nastavševs

Most important productions 2010–2020:

- *Leģionāri. Diskusija ar kaušanos.* (Legionnaires. A discussion with fight) dir. by Viesturs Sīlis, 2011
- *I. Gaile Āda* (Skin) dir. by Andrejs Jarovojš, 2011
- *Rondo* dir. by Andrejs Jarovojš, 2015
- *S. Uhanov Black sperm* dir. by Vladislavs Nastavševs, 2015
- *Taņas dzimšanas diena* (Tanya's birthday) dir. by Mārtiņš Eihe, 2016

KVADRIFRONS



Address:

Merķeļa iela 4, Rīga Circus horse stable, (entrance from A. Kalnina iela);
From 2020: Zeļļu iela 25, former Faculty of Physics, mathematics and optometry of the University of Latvia
www.kvadrifrons.lv
info@kvadrifrons.lv

Founded: 2017

Financing sources:

Mostly project financing (State Culture Capital Foundation), revenue from ticket sales, donations

Stages:

Rīga Circus horse stable – up to 50 seats

Productions per season: 5

Artistic profile: KVADRIFRONS is a non-governmental, non-commercial and institutionally independent theatre troupe founded by a number of young theatre professionals – Reinis Boters, Klāvs Mellis, Āris Matesovičs, Ance Strazda and Evarts Melnalksnis, joined by the best technical team in the world – Jānis Sniķers, Kārlis Staņa, Kārlis Tone and Inese Tone. KVADRIFRONS is a sign of changes, path and duality. The name of the company means a 360 degrees surrounding view in past and future. Together with contemporaries and sometimes on their own, KVADRIFRONS does something they find interesting, necessary and fascinating. They are contemporary, dramatic, interdisciplinary, performative, they create their own space make everybody feel welcome and belonging. Joining theatre, music, visual arts and film KVADRIFRONS aims to address the interaction of the individuals and society, react to the topicalities and build the vision of future through contradiction, laugh and jokes.

something they find interesting, necessary and fascinating. They are contemporary, dramatic, interdisciplinary, performative, they create their own space make everybody feel welcome and belonging. Joining theatre, music, visual arts and film KVADRIFRONS aims to address the interaction of the individuals and society, react to the topicalities and build the vision of future through contradiction, laugh and jokes.

Stage directors: Klāvs Mellis, Reinis Boters, Paula Pļavniece

Most important productions 2010–2020:

- *A. Kivirehk Three stories* dir. by Varis Piņķis, 2015
- *A. Rand Hymn*, a warlike melodrama based on dir. by Klāvs Mellis, 2018
- *Brīnuma skartie* (Touched by the miracle), performance-excursion in premises of former Riga circus dir. by Reinis Boters, 2018
- *Vecmāmiņu valsts* (A country of grandmothers), almost a documentary, dir. by Paula Pļavniece, 2019
- *Peturbon*, a detective story for children dir. by Paula Pļavniece, 2019

GODA Theatre



G O D A T E Ā T R I S

Address:

Kaiju iela 30, Liepāja
www.godateatis.lv
godateatris@gmail.com

Founded:

2011

Financing sources:

Self-financing and co-financing for projects by State Culture Capital Foundation

Stages:

The performance venue is flexible and changeable up to 50 seats in theatre premises, mostly the performances go on tour in schools, culture centres and theatre venues in Latvia

Productions per season:

1-2

Artistic profile: In 2011, the actor Kaspars Gods founded the theatre aiming to have an independent, experimental and alternative venue of performing arts in Liepāja. In nine years the theatre has accomplished several social projects and theatre productions, including the cooperation with Society Integration Fund and Liepāja School for children with spe-

cial needs. The productions of Goda Theatre regularly goes on tours in Latvia, mostly to schools. In 2015, the production *Slaves of Derby* marked the transition to adult audience. Currently, theatre offers several projects for schools (average 100 performances per year).

Stage directors: Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, Viesturs Roziņš, Leons Leščinskis

Most important productions 2010-2020:

- S. Valters *Žurka (The Rat)* dir. by Leons Leščinskis, 2011
- R. Bugavičute-Pēce *Tikai nesaki nevienam (You don't tell anyone)* dir. by Leons Leščinskis, 2013
- L. Judina *Dērbijas vergi (Slaves of Derby)* dir. by Viesturs Roziņš, 2015
- R. Bugavičute-Pēce *Bļitka (Ice-fishing)* dir. by Dž.Dž. Džilindžers, 2016
- K. K. Sukurs *Čomiņi (Buddies)*, production for adolescents dir. by Leons Leons Leščinskis, 2017

Theatre TT



Address:

Talsu iela 28, Rīga
www.teatristt.lv, info@teatristt.lv
 +371 29567442

Founded:

2001

Financing sources:

Self-financing, changeable part of co-financing by State Culture Capital Foundation

Stages:

Each production is staged in different venue, no traditional theatre venues and stages are used.

Productions per year:

2
 The number of performances prevails the number of new productions. Each production is shown 50-60 times.

Artistic profile: Professionalism. There is no theatre without actors. Conversation about ourselves. We would like to sit in the audience. There is no such thing as lukewarm. Mobile au-

diotheatre to be launched soon as a new development of Theatre TT.

Stage directors: Inga Tropa, Marta Elīna Martinsone, Klāvs Knuts Sukurs, Juris Strenga, Lauris Gundars

Most important productions 2010-2020:

- L. Gundars, M. Brauns, E. Zirnis *Karaliste (The kingdom)* dir. by Lauris Gundars 2010
- R. Mings *Minga rēgi (Ghosts of Ming)* dir. by Lauris Gundars, 2013
- *Latviešu kāzas (Latvian wedding)* dir. by Lauris Gundars, 2013
- *Avotu iela (Avotu street)* by ten authors, dir. by six emerging stage directors, 2015
- J. Kļava *Dāmas (Laydies)* dir. by Inga Tropa, 2016
- *Cabaret Siberia*, dir. by Lauris Gundars, 2018

Theatre of Drawings

Address:

J. Čakstes bulvāris 13-92, Jelgava
<https://zimejumuteatris.lv>
 zimejumuteatris@gmail.com
 +3712641427

Founded: 2008

Financing sources:

Self-financing

Stages:

Depending on production, mostly schools, culture centres, concert halls, churches and other venues. For traditional performances theatres up to 400 seats preferable.

Productions per year: 4

Artistic profile: Theatre of Drawings is a professional chamber theatre that applies a unique form of performing using drawing on stage, music, dance and acting. The drawing can be the element of set design or main story of the production. Different drawing

techniques are applied - acrylic colours, oil pastels, felt-point pens, water, projections from the drawing and tablet. Form is flexible and includes improvisations. The number of participants is 2-35.

Stage director: Varis Klausītājs

Most important productions
2010-2020:

- *Dzeļtaurenis (Butterfly of Poetry)*, 2012
- *Dāšnumātika (Generosimatics)*, 2014
- *Pazudušais dēls. Burkard Waldis. 1527. Rīga (The prodigal son. Burkard Waldis. 1527. Riga)*, 2017
- *Muzikālā darbnīca (Musical workshop)*, 2017
- *Tanabata jeb teika par divām zvaigznēm (Tanabata or a legend of two stars)*, 2019

ESARTE

Address:

K. Valdemāra iela 33, Rīga
 asnate.silina@gmail.com
 elin.auzan@gmail.com

Founded: 2020

Financing sources:

Mostly project financing (State Culture Capital Foundation), revenue from ticket sales, donations

Stages:

Company without premises, different venues

Productions per season: 4

Artistic profile: Theatre company ESARTE is an artistically independent group - a theatre platform that explores the present time and a person from a close perspective. In this purpose, ESARTE is collaborating with other artists, producers, and institutions. The theatre company unites several actors: Matīss Budovskis, Agris Krapivņickis, Elizabete Skrastiņa, Sandija Dovgāne, Una Eglīte, Alīda Pērkone and Mārtiņš Gailis. The Artistic director of the Theatre Company ESARTE is Elmārs Seņkovs, the director of the company - Asnate Siliņa.

An important aspect in the creative work of the theatre company ESARTE is to set the task for the actors to explore the human being and the society, to capture the real-life characters and integrate them into a literary work and drama, thus developing the art of acting. The purpose of the company is to reflect, evaluate, explore the phenomena existing next to us in the everyday world using different theatrical and artistic means.

Stage director: Elmārs Seņkovs

Most important productions 2010-2020:

- ESARTE *Pēdējās stundas (Last hours)*, an acquaintance dialogue directed by Elmārs Seņkovs, co-production with *Dirty Deal Theatre*, 2020
- Ivan Vyrpaev *Iran Conference*, online production, directed by Elmārs Seņkovs, 2020
- Elmārs Seņkovs, Matīss Budovskis *aSAPIENSI*, about evolution in one part directed by Elmārs Seņkovs, choreography by Elīna Gediņa (ex. Lutce), Valmiera Summer Theatre Festival, 2020

Willa Theatre

Address:

K. K. fon Stricka villa, Aristida Briāna iela 9, Riga
<http://facebook.com/willateatris>
<http://instagram.com/willateatris>
info@willa.lv

Founded: 2020

Financing sources:

Self-financing, revenue from tickets sold

Stages:

Open-air performances take place in the garden of C. C. von Stritzky – up to 100 seats

Large hall – up to 100 seats

Productions per season: 5

Artistic profile: The manifest of the company says: "We want to speak about the most important things without pathos, to reveal the serious matters without didactics. We aim to be sensitive, deep and challenging. Paradoxes, irony, sincerity, love, written word and our own adventures in-

spire us on our path to the hearts of the audience".

Willa Theatre was founded on 2020 and is kindly hosted by C. C. von Stritzky villa – a new venue of concerts and other events in Riga. Willa Theatre offers theatre productions, performances, poetry and music evenings as well as productions for children.

Stage directors: Varis Piņķis, Rolandas Atkočūnas, Dž. Dž. Džilindžers

Most important productions (all in 2020):

- *Putn ilgs (Bird's longin')*, dir. by Varis Piņķis
- *Stāsts par Mī... (A Story of LO...)*, dir. by Varis Piņķis
- *Petuški (Petushki)*, dir. by Dž. Dž. Džilindžers
- *Ceturtais krēsls (The Fourth Chair)*, dir. by Rolandas Atkočūnas
- *#DiToo*, dir. by Dita Lūriņa

THEATRE FESTIVALS

Homo Novus


The International Festival of Contemporary Theatre Homo Novus is the leading performing arts festival in Latvia and one of the biggest in the Baltic region. It takes place in Riga and introduces audiences to both emerging and renowned artists that seek ways of expressing their views and opinion about contemporary world and society. Since 1995, 15 festival editions have taken place.

Valmiera Summer Theatre festival

An interdisciplinary summer festival staged in Valmiera city environment, in unusual places and original forms. Performances that entertain, enrich and provoke, created especially for the festival by national and international professionals. Festival has been taking place every year since 2016.


Riga Opera Festival

The Riga Opera Festival, founded in 1998 as the first festival of its size and scale in Eastern Europe, has become a valuable tradition. The Festival is highly anticipated by both Latvian audiences and opera-lovers from abroad who form the biggest part of all Riga Opera Festival's visitors. Every summer, the Festival marks the end of the Latvian National Opera's performance season with an overview of the best moments of the previous season, offering fans a chance to relive their favourite scenes or see what they've missed. The high quality of the opera's productions has been noted outside of the country, and has helped the opera to draw brilliant guest conductors and soloists to Riga.



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Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča



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