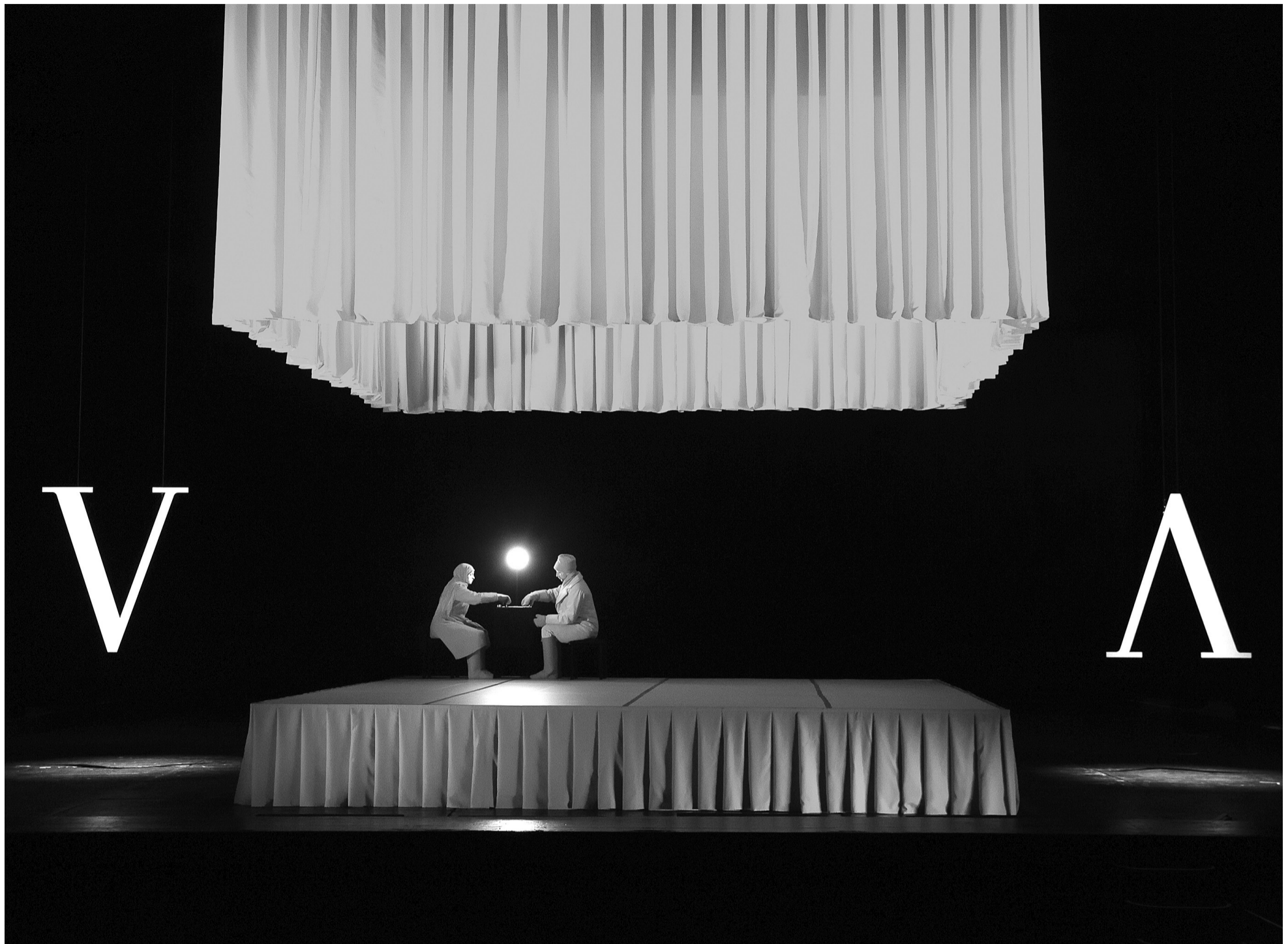


Specifically Latvian Vol. 5



Elīna Gediņa and Rūdolfs Gediņš in the dance performance *Very Good Minutes* at Dailes Theatre, a bodily conversation between a woman and a man referencing Walter Benjamin's *Moscow Diary*

At a time when cultural venues in Latvia are closing their doors for the second lockdown, creative processes around the country continue to pulsate, emerging in new shapes and forms. In the conditions of an epidemiological crisis, many Latvian artists have come up with ingenious, life-affirming, socially sensitive works focusing on the awareness of self-identity as it is formed in this particular time and region. Lately, the performing arts field in Latvia could be best described by its careful study of local society and its ability to respond to extraordinary circumstances, confirming the one truth about the creative force, that it can never be limited, only challenged.

In 2021, the Latvian Theatre Showcase is changing its name to *LiVe* and inaugurates its new website live.theatre.lv to invite international guests and professionals of the industry to engage online with Latvian performances, pitches, presentations, discussions and talks. As the word “*LiVe*” suggests, Latvian theatre is up and alive and Latvian people are not giving up on their image of diligent theatre-goers. *LiVe* aims to acquaint foreign partners with contemporary Latvian performing arts works, artists and the specifics of the local theatre industry in order to promote more fruitful international cooperation and a more diverse development of the Latvian performing arts scene.

Among the performances included in the *LiVe* programme, it's possible to observe more and more works that pay attention to the diversity of the audience and the ability of more varied societal groups to attend and experience the shows. Like the show by Valters Silis, based on the play by Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce *The Boy Who Saw in the Dark*, which was staged at the National

Theatre and brought large audiences to a world where the primary sensory organ is hearing. It can also be observed in the sound and music-based performances, like *Labrys+* by IevaKrish, or *The Lost Songs* by Agate Bankava, Artūrs Čukurs and Andrejs Jarovojš that invite the viewer to activate all their different senses to overcome the fear of the unknown through the experience of rhythm and one's own body and voice.

Several Latvian theatre directors are addressing the topic of existential loneliness, like in the contemporary staging of Mikhail Lermontov's romantic poem *Demon* by Viesturs Meikšāns, or Vladislav's Nastavshev's *Strangers on a Train*, where the creator reflects on the practice of art as the only means to survive in life.

Meanwhile, one of the international co-productions of the showcase *Exercises of (Be)longing* by Jānis Balodis, Katrīna Dūka, Barbara Lehtna, Kristina Hudenko addresses such questions as how we meet and how we will meet in the future to the audience members and to themselves. Longing and striving for the presence of another person, for collective experience, for close and familiar things permeates most of the showcase's dance and theatre works.

An authentic cross-section of Latvian society can be observed in theatre director's Elmārs Seņkovs and film director's Liene Linde's theatre-transformed-into-video piece *Run* made together with the former students of Latvian Academy of Culture. In this adaptation of Alexander Vampilov's play *Duck Hunting*, the directors duo find a paradoxical parallel between *Ikea* furnished apartments and the uniformed Soviet lifestyle standards, criticized in Vampilov's work. Seņkovs and Linde show an exemplary collaborative work that dares to interpret the eternal classics from new angles, without a fear

of using experimental and digital tools to overthrow the fourth wall. The same description would apply to the authors of the opera film *Baņuta*, a collaboration between Latvian artists, musicians and German music theatre *Hauen und Stechen*, who are recklessly mixing together different genres and artforms in an excitingly energetic film based on the first Latvian national opera. As the creators of several shows point out, the Covid crisis has popped a number of aching societal problems and the need to talk publicly about them to the surface. There is a great curiosity to communicate about the collective traumas caused by the past and the ever changing political situation at varying levels of readiness, daring to point the mirror towards one-self.

Maybe a little late, but not too late, Latvian performing arts have matured grounds for a frank conversation about feminism and violence against women. “It is a pleasure that women can set an example for men about how to talk about their traumas. Because conversation is urgent for us today,” explains one of the creators of *Physical Evidence Museum* Laura Stašāne. The contribution of the Eastern European region to this discourse may bring a fresh perspective on the feminist issues that still affect women globally, especially during crisis situations.

The desire to consider the viewer, to think about the audience and society at large, to invite them to be more participatory and ready to be directly affected – these are hopeful trajectories, where the Latvian artists seem to have found a solid foundation. As well as the country's ability to see itself in the European and global context presenting its own culture not as an exception, but even as a possible role model. These are all life-affirming processes you are invited to witness on *LiVe*!



Elina Gediņa, Rūdolfs Gediņš in *Very Good Minutes*

TRAPPED IN A CUBE

Very Good Minutes is a performance by two couples, movement artists Elina Gediņa and Rūdolfs Gediņš and visual artists Krista and Reinis Dzudzilo. A third couple conceptually comes into play, as the performance refers to Walter Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* and his relation with legendary Latvian avant-garde theatre director Asja Lācis. The production takes place as a non-verbal bodily conversation between a woman and a man who are trapped in their relationship as in the red cube, symbolically represented on the stage as a claustrophobic cage where their relationship is being publicly exposed. The artists transpose the analytical work by Benjamin into choreographic language reflecting on the coexistence of two people, two personalities involved in one story and the collaborative process of two forms of expression.

Due to the pandemic the premiere of the show has been postponed several times for almost a year, denying the artists the chance to enjoy the synergy with the public and move on. In the conversation with Inta Balode the artists Elina and Rūdolfs open up about psychological challenges imposed on the stage artists in these difficult times and the mental endurance needed to withstand very good minutes that seem to have no end.

Do you call yourself a duet in this show?

Rūdolfs Gediņš: We have never called ourselves that. We usually say "Minutes" or "show". It seems to me that a duet is something really short, maybe three or seven minutes long. Sometimes, when trying to define this sub-genre, the word "two ...something" comes up, but somehow, we don't emphasize that we are two.

Did the idea of *Very Good Minutes* come to you both at once?

Elina Gediņa: I think the idea came from me, when I was reading Walter Benjamin's *Moscow Diary*. I was on vacation in a retreat after the tiring season of 2018. As I read it, I was permanently amazed by how precise his language was. And I was wondering if I could achieve such accuracy in my movements. So, I started noting down the sentences in the book that I thought had some choreographic or rhythmic dynamics. When I came back from the retreat, I suggested that book to Rūdolfs to see if he felt the same way. So, he read the book with this thought about those sentences in mind and noted sentences that he related to. And then we put them together and compared whether we had a similar understanding of these precise, dynamic things.

And did you have a similar understanding?

Rūdolfs: I would say our choices were quite similar. There were around 80 phrases altogether, we wrote them down on big sheets.

Elina: It was really interesting to see if some parts would overlap. There was no specific task, just curiosity. When we compared the sentences, it turned out that sometimes I have only marked one word, but Rūdis had marked half a page.

Rūdolfs: But we realized that even if some sentences

matched, we were thinking very differently about them. Elina thought about the choreography of the text, how it sounds or is formed, but for me the formulation of the idea was more important.

Elina: So, basically, it turned out that I looked more at the form, but Rūdis looked at the content.

Rūdolfs: I just liked what was said there, those seemed like very fulfilled pages. Sequences of words that cannot be repeated or understood from the first time. But when you understand them, it is like – wow! He articulates the feelings that I have never been able to put into words so precisely.

Elina: We finished this show a year ago... Now, when we are "re-rehearsing" it and watching the video archive from the rehearsals, it is also very interesting to see how many different principles we've tried out that wouldn't appear in the performance. It is quite funny to see how we try over and over again something that is obviously not fitting, but even after a week or a month we haven't given up yet. But the good thing about our "twoness" is that we can offer some principles to each other and immediately try them in practice. To see how the other reacts to it, and understand if it should be changed or reversed for example... It is an absolute cooperation.

Rūdolfs: We had that list with the eighty sentences written on big sheets of paper, and we chose one of those for each rehearsal and we tried out these sentences one by one. But in the end, we realized that we didn't need so many sentences. Eight were enough. So, in the end the performance consists of only eight sentences. But there are many phrases that I think of in the context of the performance. That I have in my mind and that help me to get through it, even though they are not structurally included in the dramaturgy. The quote "very good minutes" is not included for example, but we constantly refer to it in how we feel about it. Everything that we have read we have accumulated, but not in a fully conscious way.

In the end, can you recognize which idea belongs to whom?

Rūdolfs: We have documented it all in our notebooks, everything is written down, but at some point we were doing everything together. In the beginning, when we tried each principle, it was clear – I am the choreographer of this part of the rehearsal, and you will be the choreographer of the other part.

Elina: Especially, when you already have an image in your mind of how you want it to be... The other one doesn't know what I have imagined. So, the one who offers the principle is the master, but if the other one feels that something is wrong there, then we respect it.

Rūdolfs: The good thing about our tandem is that we are quite close in life and we don't need the theoretical principles of cooperation, because we just do these things together.

How does the fact that you are life partners affect the process of co-creation?

Elina: I think that work could only come about because we were together. I mean also practically; we were able to continue working on it during the pandemic because we were one household. But then again ... if

we were just colleagues maybe we wouldn't have such problems with the discipline.

Rūdolfs: We sometimes booked the rehearsal space in the Daugava Stadium, which is only 4 minutes from home, but it was so hard to get out of the house, especially when you know that the world is closed and no one will be angry at you. Or sometimes we went to the rehearsal hall...

Elina: ... and were playing dominoes for one hour. But I think there is a lot of intimacy in this material that can be felt on the stage.

Rūdolfs: When we sent the material to Krista and Reinis [Dzudzilo], they commented on how sexually charged it was. Although that was not our intention... but all the principles come from us and each of them is in relation to the other person. It is about our feelings, our love, connection, anger, humanness, anything. This is not a story about us, but this is something happening to us.

But still, do you identify with Asja Lācis and Walter Benjamin to some extent?

Elina: As Rūdis said, my interest was quite practical, not substantive. I really liked the rhythm of the sentences or how witty and concise Benjamin could describe some phenomena. It was definitely not like I saw myself in this story. It was a professional admiration, I liked how skilfully Benjamin works with the language, which is his medium. And I wondered if I could just as accurately convey that material into dance, which is my medium. Of course, after thinking more about it, already in the context of the show, it turns out that it is also a conversation between two people, that it could be a conversation between us and between visual artists. But this show is not a conversion or a staging of the book, even though the ideas of the show are definitely inspired by the book.

Rūdolfs: One might think that there is a lot taken from the book, but the two characters basically enter in the show as a visual material for the ideas that Walter Benjamin wrote about. We were interested in how Benjamin defined his relationship with Asja, how he puts the feelings into words, creating a clearly sharp philosophical concept about relationships in general. We are interested in his concept, where the relationship with Asja serves as an example. And in this concept, we see ourselves. We show what it does to us, how we recognize these ideas in our own lives. This is something that we understand internally, but is difficult to define. The concept is very clear, when you don't try to verbalize it.

Do you think you have achieved something in this synthesis that would not have been possible on your own?

Elina: Obviously, there are many things that I could not practically accomplish, because these are principles where you need two people. I have a great passion for the Fighting Monkey practice, which generally involves the work to be done in pairs, and now I have found my pair with whom to practice it. I think that this practice has now taken on a form where my love appears in the movement. I practiced the Fighting Monkey technique also when we were not together and it stayed in my body. But when you are alone... you must be really creative to figure out how to do the same things with a lifeless object or an imaginary partner. Here we could practice it very directly between us, and the forms that come out are its result. This is what is different from solo.

In rehearsals, we usually warmed up for an hour in the Fighting Monkey mode, and then moved to the material, and the warming up principles were gradually shifting into the material of performance in a more concrete form.

Rūdolfs: And it doesn't seem to be separated from who we are on stage or in life – whatever "life" means. Because in this case, there really is no life outside of what we do. It probably sounds dramatic... respectively, that is not an expression outside of ourselves.

Elina: The way we move or the technique we practice in *Minutes* is the way we think it should look like. This is what we find meaningful and we could go indefinitely in those qualities of movement. But when I have to perform in another show or festival, it seems to me a different form, a different language in which I have to put myself in. I can do it better or worse, but it's something else. This is not mine or something I insanely believe in. I fulfil another person's vision, aesthetics or movement principle. But here, it just happens that we broadly agree with each other.

But maybe it's good then that you never finish the *Very Good Minutes* so they can last forever...

Elina: I'm not seduced by the idea of eternal

postponement of the *Minutes*. We have invested a lot in this show, and so many decisions are subordinated to it. It's really painful every time when we have to cancel the show due to some global or local reason. Of course, when you look at the show on your computer screen you see just two young people moving around... It has all been an extensive and all-encompassing process that has been reduced to one red cube.

Rūdofs: Sometimes in the theatre after the premiere you feel that something could be added or changed. But in the *Minutes*, all the decisions had been made before the planned premiere, it had already reached its final form. They were all deliberate decisions. The time won't add anything to it.

Elina: Its form is complete, but life and presence are contained within these scenes. They are structured in a way that unexpectedness is inside them. And that is the structure we have wanted.

Rūdofs: Everything else I could say would be too emotional. We are together just a little longer than the process of this show. We started our life together by making this show. Making this show has been a stage in our lives and it must take place so that we can go to the next stage. We like who we were, but we want to become a different "we". As I said, it all sounds so banal when put into words.

A SHOW IN THE PARCEL MACHINE

A couple of days before the show, each spectator of the *Exercises of (Be)longing* will receive a packet containing five envelopes with photos from their nearest parcel station (or a digital package containing 5 digital envelopes for those who attend the Latvian Theatre showcase). A specific time and a phone number will be indicated on each envelope. This performance was conceived during the lockdown period and focuses on longing for a time when people will be able to meet again. *Exercises of (Be)longing* consists of true stories from people who at some point in their lives have tried to connect to their peers or have chosen not to do so. The performance by Jānis Balodis, Katrīna Dūka, Barbara Lehtna, Kristina Hudenko is built around the concept of acceptance and the cost of fitting in. In this interview one of the authors Jānis Balodis shares his thoughts about ethical ways of involving participants and the audience in experiencing art.

***Exercises of (Be)longing* is a performance that is created by both parties, people who share their stories as participants, and people who call the number and listen to their story. What is the most important thing that the audience member can gain from an art project that involves active participation?**

I think what matters is how the *Exercises of (Be)longing* builds up as an experience. It's just an hour, five stories, each six to ten minutes long. And during this time, our goal is to take the viewer through all these different experiences. It comes together as an emotional, intellectual journey in a roller coaster. You've just had this one story, you haven't recovered your breath yet, as the next follows. It's an opportunity, if you want to do so, to reflect about these things, to process them in your mind, to understand how to look at them and what to take from them... But we can't determine the order in which those stories will be told to each viewer. As creators, we do not stand by the public and cannot influence how their experience will develop. We can't be present at the very moment when the viewer experiences the show. What is different in this show, is that you have more of a chance to figure out your own version, which makes more sense for you personally. I can't say what each person will get from it and take away with them.

Why is the moment of spontaneity important for you? There is always a risk that something can go wrong. Is that some kind of freedom that you gain from this unpredictability?

Yes, the fact that I don't know what the combination will be, is very important. I don't know the sequence of stories that each person will hear and what experience the person has previously had and what result this connection can create in each specific case.



Exercises of (Be)longing by Jānis Balodis, Katrīna Dūka, Barbara Lehtna, Kristina Hudenko

How did you choose the people who would take part in this project with their stories?

One criterion was to realize that each person is different. Everyone has their own shoes and their own vision of how we go through this life. Every person has a different relationship with the world and with other people. There are things we seemed to know about some people. We knew that something had happened to someone in their life, but we agreed not to push anyone to talk about that exact situation. We have made our choice, we addressed and invited that person, we explained that we were making a work about belonging. We said: "We are interested in some event in your life where you have felt that you have or haven't belonged to some group." And what comes to that person's mind, will be the right choice to talk about their story. Sometimes it was something completely different from what we, creators, had imagined.

I had at least two stories like that. But there were again cases when we sent the information to someone and it turned out that the person had already chosen and thought a lot about this topic, and was ready to tell his or her story in the first 30 minutes. It was all very different, also regarding the age, gender and cultural diversity. Thinking about the fact that both Russian and Latvian speakers live in Riga, it was important for us not to create a situation where you choose the Latvian language, a Latvian person is speaking to you. No, there would also be someone from the Russian-speaking community, who speaks Latvian and vice versa. That was also the aspect we focused on.

There is an option to choose between three languages. Does it mean that these people belong to three different communities?

There is one group of people who speak Russian, one in English, and two groups in Latvian. But to whom do these people belong? For example, there is one guy who is associated with four cultures, but he speaks Latvian. Maybe we have to ask Kristina [Hudenko] about the Russian group or Barbara [Lehtna] about the English speakers... What is their situation of belonging? But it is not that people belong only through language.

Why was it important that the stories in this work were told by the same people with whom these things happened? You could do it in a way that the participants give their photos, then you write the stories together, and then they are read by a professional actor...

One of the participants is asking me this question from time to time: why don't you read it yourself or give it to the actor? My answer would be: maybe that's why! We don't want you to speak about what you don't want to say. It is important to us that the participants only share what

they want to share. Tell us what they want to tell. Each evening of the performance, you will repeat this story up to fifteen times. The fact that it is yours means that no one else can tell it instead of you, it is your personal motivation to share it. Only you have such a relationship with this story. And I think you can feel it when you listen to it. There would be a different connection if you see a photo and recognize the voice of an actor. Then the

"But it is not that people belong only through language"

question would arise – why? But when you know that it is important for the person who is sharing the story, then it starts to become important for you as a listener. Or at least you can start thinking about it.

The idea is that two strangers are brought together, and one of them anonymously tells his story to the other. But in Estonia or Latvia, as the circle of theatre goers is still very narrow, the anonymity might be quite limited?

Therefore, people can choose what they share. We have agreed that faces won't be seen in the photos. Among these stories, there are also very harsh experiences, and then we try to ask if the participant is really willing to share it and repeat it many times. The aim of the work is not to share a good story but rather whether it will be comfortable for that person to tell it. Even if there is a fantastic moment in that story, it is not worth making a person feel bad.

And one more thing, the listeners are warned about the fact that if there is a reaction or situation that should not be there, the narrator can stop talking. As for anonymity, in some cases we decided not to address some people who seemed very recognizable. We realized that this could limit one's own ability to choose what to say. At the same time, if someone wants, they can also say their name.

But it is better to have enough time to agree upon everything with participants, to see their reaction when they read the text. It is important to get their approval before the text is being placed on the paper. The same goes for other dramatic works where you take something from real life. Even if it is later turned into fiction, it is important to look at how you build relationships with people who have been your experts.



Baņuta by Hauen und Stechen, Story Hub, Sansusi



BAŅUTA – FIRST LATVIAN OPERA REBORN IN A FILM

A hundred years after the premiere of Alfrēds Kalniņš' first Latvian opera *Baņuta* in 1920, comes the opera film *Baņuta* – an international project that melds opera, music performances, the conditionality of the performing arts and contemporary performativity. Director Franziska Kronfoth and dramaturg Evarts Melnalksnis bring together Latvian artists and the German music theatre collective *Hauen und Stechen* to interpret the dramatic message, playing with time and shattering space into pieces. In the interview with *Specifically Latvian* the dramaturg explains more about the process of bringing forward the collective experience of women who have suffered through the wars, mixing the boundaries between genres and breaking the fourth wall.



Evarts Melnalksnis

Where did the impetus to develop this international cooperation come from?

It was my initiative as I had a great desire to work with the German music theatre collective *Hauen und Stechen* from Berlin and the director Franziska Kronfoth in Latvia. They are often described in literature as an example of a potential future form of music theatre. The way they merge together different genres, how excitingly and energetically they work with pieces of the repertoire, deconstructing them and complementing them with new elements, combining music with theatre, and performance, visually gorgeous action, also video is always present. In Latvia, we usually do not work so freely with opera, we believe that opera should be played from the beginning to the end, you cannot cut it and do whatever you like with it. But music theatre has a huge potential. *Hauen und Stechen* have found a way to build small ensemble parties on top of the piano excerpt of the opera, and to involve different voices, to involve actors who sing and play, and instrumentalists.

Why did you choose *Baņuta*, the first Latvian national opera?

I offered Franziska various pieces that we could work on. It seemed important that in Latvia we work with a Latvian motif. And she accidentally took the piece about the young partisan *Baņuta* and really liked the story with all the Midsummer celebrations in its centre. She immediately became interested in the mystical rituals, unusual pagan celebrations and also the tremendous violence that this story contains. The violence begins even

before the beginning of the story. Franziska said that the first two acts have atrocities for an entire opera. (*Laughs.*) And it goes on and on.

Baņuta also has a very interesting history of creation. The libretto competition took place in 1903, when the Latvian state didn't exist. Being part of the Russian Empire, Latvians were looking for their identity in the times before the Crusaders invasion, in some mythical Elysium or Arcadia. And so initially the opera's events take place in Lithuania, but the celebration of Midsummer is very Latvian. *Baņuta* is brought to the sacred worship place Romuva in a region in Prussia, nowadays Kaliningrad. *Baņuta* is a thorough hybrid of cultures, which was exciting to study – we were peeling its layers like an onion. There are many stories about how this work has been censored, taking out Lithuania's name, or how the Soviet regime made the authors write a happy ending for the opera as in the Soviet state there should be no tragic suicides. Thus, it tells different historic contexts of the 20th century in Latvia.

Baņuta is very energetic and passionate, but at the same time very fragile. She is an atypical female character in Latvian art. And all that she wants is to find her "laime" ("happiness" in Latvian, ed.). The German part of the team says all they hear in the music is "laime, laime, laime!". Although there are so many terrible dramatic events.

How did you manage to put it all together?

Our version has three endings. We have three different *Baņutas*, who disentangle or dismantle this character, creating many perspectives of it. We have kept the original tragic ending, where she dies because she is doomed to this tragic fate. As women's history researcher Vita Zelče pointed out to us – *Baņuta* is always handed over from one man to another, which is characteristic of the narratives of that time. And even in the end... she does not want to commit suicide, she says "I want to see the sun", but her lover decides on her behalf: "No, we have to die now".

Then there is the Soviet ending, where the authors, shortly after the Soviet occupation, were told to write a happy ending because they wanted to prepare for guest performances in the USSR. In this version, the people help her and *Baņuta* becomes even more revolutionary... but also with this ending, something was missing. So there was a big challenge for us to create its third ending from our own today's perspective. But how should we finish it? We have deliberately made this story so fragmented and porous... because we no longer believe in the big narratives. We don't believe in one single *Baņuta* who has suffered for all of us. In our time, we don't have one big answer. We gave her new characteristics, we attributed her own agency to *Baņuta*, so that she does not comply to the tragedy written by the male authors. We set her free and let her go with all the experience that she has. We released her, to go out somewhere and live her life.

The work you have created, is that still an opera?

I like the term "music theatre", but I know it is a calque from German language. When you watch the opera film, you will see how everything is mixed and merged together – there are texts that are only played, not sung by the actors, there are scenes that are added. But music is an integral structural element of it. The opera music by Alfrēds Kalniņš is accompanied by three of his solo songs, and a German chanson, some folk songs. We treat Kalniņš with great respect. It is very good that the Latvian

composer Jēkabs Nimanis continued to work with this music, because he feels and understands Kalniņš' music. Maybe his music is where our identity comes in, it is the quintessence of Latvian folk wisdom.

After the first premiere in 1920, our neo-romantic writer Kārlis Skabale described *Baņuta* as "a musical poem, a resplendent work, an invaluable piece added to our music literature". It has always been perceived as a very visual and multimedia project.

Visuality has always been characteristic of the music of Alfrēds Kalniņš. He has spent a lot of time with various artists and painters. And his music is very picturesque. He does not illustrate, but adorns and creates atmospheric images in his music where the piano accompaniment cannot be separated from the vocal line. At the same time, the librettist Artūrs Krūmiņš was a young student of architecture, who later became a professor. And as an architect he creates two strict sides of the story – exterior where collective political battles and the Midsummer festivities take place and an intimate interior where *Baņuta* is only with her lover.

But our idea of the opera film came about when Covid epidemic started, and we needed to invent some solution. In a way, it was a compromise imposed by external circumstances, but at the same time it is an opportunity. Because the film will last longer and reach a wider audience. Since the beginning we wanted to merge the different genres and formats – we did not want to film this show just frontally. And there would be nothing frontal in it as it is played all around in that space of a garage. So, we decided to use the cinematic potential as well – not like a psychological Hollywood film, though. We decided to revive the opera film as an extinct genre with its kitsch and particular camp style. However, it is still a theatre production.

How does *Baņuta* comment on today's political and social situation in Latvia?

I think it is in tune with who we are here now. In this opera, many rituals never get completed. There is always something strange that interrupts them... even the wedding does not happen to the end. Our explanation is that people are influenced by their previous experiences that took place before the opera events. And that is the experience of the war. They have a trauma that they do not get rid of. That is why the war experience is so present and why all the revenge and cruelty is taking place in it. And the way I project it into today's society... we are traumatized. The last great trauma was the collapse of the USSR, that mostly affected our parent's generation but also my generation as we went through that harsh experience together in the 1990s. We also emphasize that this work concerns the Eastern European region in general. *Baņuta* is not just a Latvian story, it is the story of our region. The traumatic experiences are similar in Lithuania and Belarus as well.

We will have a program of interviews accompanying this work. The conversations with historians about such topics as women partisans and war crimes that have not been much discussed here, because people who committed those crimes were among Latvia's founders and liberators. There will be conversations also with psychotherapists about traumas, and they will touch on the topic of Covid-19 and how we will deal with this experience. Because it is another challenge and obstacle that has affected not only our society, but even the fate of this opera... again.



Elīna Bojarkina during the shooting of the *Run*

THEATRE DURING LOCKDOWN: ACTORS IN HELMETS WITH POLICE AROUND THE CORNER

In the 1970s, Alexander Vampilov wrote the play *Duck Hunting* as a critique of the Soviet system. In 2020, director Elmārs Seņkovs together with the students transformed it into a piece about contemporary Latvian society, and, only a year later, he had to change the dramaturgy again to adapt the performance to the circumstances of the pandemic. Working closely together with film director Liene Linde, a screen version of *Duck Hunting* was created and named *Run*. Looking through the small screens of *GoPro* cameras, actors continue to interplay with each other in the structure of Vampilov's play, offering the viewer a breathtakingly wide first-person perspective on their peers.



Elmārs Seņkovs



Liene Linde

Why did you decide to stage *Duck Hunting* by Alexander Vampilov in 2020?

Elmārs Seņkovs: I started working with the acting class in the Latvian Academy of Culture. It was their third year when students were given one of the classics to work on. I've always liked Vampilov as a playwright, but I wouldn't stage him in a professional theatre, because his work has lost its relevance today. But for the dialogues or the psychological aspect, the text is good exercise material. So, we started working on its fragments, and in two years we developed this material. We returned to it regularly with different tasks and approaches, until we got to the question – could these heroes be found and would they exist today? Students transformed them into today's characters and the performance started to emerge.

Does that mean that students convinced you about the topicality of this work?

Elmārs: Yes, the students convinced me with what they made out of it. Their task was to bring the prototypes of people today, and all the monologues you see in the last version are their monologues. These are words that came from their friends, acquaintances, or they integrated their own feelings into these characters. It is the result of the students' work combined with the original dramatic material and transformed into today's reality. Vampilov's *Duck Hunting* was important in its Soviet context; he was a critic of his time. My colleagues at the Academy were skeptical, they said that it wouldn't be possible to apply this material to modern times. But I'm glad we somehow succeeded, even if we had to remove many scenes and delete several characters from the play. But in the first exam, the students authentically played the Soviet version using the clothing and elements of the environment of

that time. We have seriously studied that era, so the study of this work has gone through several cycles.

What do you call it "the new format" and why was it created?

Elmārs: The reason to make it was related to the production process. When the pandemic broke out, we still wanted to keep showing this work, but it was not financially profitable anymore. We needed a hall with a certain number of seats to earn from it. At least the opportunity to show it in the Daile Theatre, but the pandemic situation disrupted these plans, and so it continued for a long time. Meanwhile, the actors were growing up, changing, everyone was going their own way, but I knew I didn't want to lose this show. I wanted to preserve it... So, the first idea, of course, was to film it. I remembered that film director Liene Linde had come to our show and spoke positively about it. Theatre makers always feel very honoured when they receive a compliment from the people in the cinema. And I called Liene.

Liene Linde: I think the first question was – what do we call this production? We came up with the name "transformed show", because it was neither cinema nor theatre, and we needed a name for this in-between space.

As for me, I've always wanted to do something in the theatre, but I've never studied it and didn't know how to start... Elmārs' offer seemed to be a great opportunity to work with this media, at least in some way, although not in its pure form. The thing we have in common with Elmārs is that we always want to try something new. Respectively, we are not interested in working on something we already know how to do.

Of course, the funds available to us were intended for the restoration of the theatre show and were absolutely insufficient for cinema. So, we had to find the middle ground and make it an interesting process for both of us, while treating the original material fairly and keeping all those great things that the young generation of actors have brought to this show.

And after some thinking, I came up with the idea about *GoPro* cameras, even though they are often used. Especially during the pandemic period, when more and more digital theatre products have started to appear. But we decided to film absolutely everything with a *GoPro*, to make actors play with the cameras on their heads and then to choose the camera angles only in the editing process... For this purpose, together with the director of photography Dāvids Smiltiņš we invented a special device – the camera was attached to the bicycle helmet. This is not a typical cinematic approach. It was financially feasible, and it was interesting for all of us, including the actors, who were suddenly given a new task to become the cameramen and women. We could now show how the characters look at each other, what comes into their view, how they react to it. *GoPro* is a very exposing media.

When we found this key, everyone had great enthusiasm about this adventure, but it was a very difficult process as well, and the post-production takes a long time. We filmed it for more than half a year, since it was difficult to arrange locations during the pandemic situation. Now we can look back at it with a smile, but during the filming it was not very amusing... Several days of filming had to take place during the curfew, when people were not allowed to be outside after 22:00. We had the permission to film in the bar *Hedgehog in the Mist* that has large windows throughout the quarter. It looked like we were having a party inside, and people were calling the police on us. The police arrived several times in one night, and in the end we had very little footage to use, because as soon as the actors started performing, the blue lights of the police car came in through the windows.

Elmārs: I have no experience in cinema. It looked like a typical film set with the clapperboard and soundman, even though it was not... The cinema process has always seemed to me to be very strictly organized, while the theatre is much calmer and more fluid... The actors were working really hard playing with the huge helmets and expressing themselves through such a small screen, but they were acting very humanly and accurately the way they did on the theatre scene.

Sounds like some guerrilla art project...

Liene: This was experimental territory for all of us. When I'm working in cinema with Latvian actors, I always try to get rid of theatricalism, but in this case the theatrical acting was conceptual, intended in the source material. It was not cinematic dramaturgy, it was theatre where actors come and go off the screen, where conversations tend to be longer. That's why we call it a "transformed show". You never know what it will be like

when you turn on the camera and tell the actor to act like it was reality. They have no place to hide, the film set is much more predetermined – there are lights, there is one angle, the team is around you, and the actors know which way to go and which direction to face. But here we only create the frame, we draw the line of the performance space, and the crew disappears, they are hiding around the corner with the tablet screen. We leave the actors alone acting towards this strange device which makes them look like cyborgs. There was a risk... but they made it, they performed brilliantly against their cyborg partners.

But why was it still important to keep the stage on the screen?

Elmārs: It was my whim. It was important for me that the audience who will see the work for the first time would understand that it's a transformed theatre show, that the source came from the stage. I wanted to capture it all – not only the actors, but also the atmosphere, the loneliness of the stage, which was so characteristic during the pandemic. In a way we all felt left alone in an empty hall... I often caught myself thinking that people might realize that they can live without theatre... I think my apocalyptic mood is reflected in it.

Liene: Also because of the long monologues that we were calling "confessions". It didn't seem right to film them with *GoPro*, because they are written for one person. Also, filming the stage was a way to preserve the original scenography. And thirdly, it is very difficult to watch the *GoPro* footage for extended periods of time. I wanted to give the viewer some rest from its intensity. So, they could switch to another room of reflection and then come back.

We keep repeating "it's not cinema, it's not cinema" ... but it is cinema! Cinema can be extremely diverse. And the theatre can be very diverse, too! It was an opportunity to put the language of cinema and the language of theatre into one production, and make all the different moves. It was just one theatrical move when the actor acts without pretending to be in the same space with the listener.

Why does the furniture in the sets still have the price tags on it?

Elmārs: It was an element that was left from the first on-stage production. We wanted to create a cold and alienated environment to represent the contemporary world, and our set designer Liga Zepa borrowed this technique from *Ikea*. When you look at their posters, they are very impersonal and intrusive at the same time. They make up the story of how different types of people should live – the bachelor's lifestyle, the couple's lifestyle etc. We even went on a field-trip to *Ikea* with the students. I gave them a task to look at the showroom as a museum, how it is strategically and artistically planned. Its dramaturgy takes you through life – first you enter the living room pavilion, then you go to the kitchen, then the bedroom, then the children's room. They show you the right way of how to live your life, so cliché... In the play, Zilov strongly resists this way of living, he resists being told what prosperity should look like. Nowadays, this kind of well-being can be achieved quite quickly. When you are 30 or even 20 years old, you can take out a loan and build this idyllic lifestyle for yourself. Therefore, we are making allusions to Vampilov's work in which he tries to resist the system.

Liene: We even considered filming everything in the *Ikea* showroom. I think this is a specific aspect from Vampilov's era, which we have purposefully abandoned, that comes across in today's reality. The furniture is quite an exact parallel. In Soviet times, we lived in similar apartments and we all had the same furniture, the same Polish shelving systems. And today we have voluntarily returned to the same place. Only today, we have replaced Polish shelves with *Ikea* shelves. We choose this uniform living space, lifestyle, the easiest way... you think that you will belong to the middle class, if you have *Ikea*.

The apartment where we filmed was already furnished. Basically, we filmed in a ready-made setting that had been put up for sale, and it contained all these ideas from *Duck Hunting*. Even the slippers were put in place. Also, the bar *Hedgehog in the Mist* is a franchise that exists everywhere in the city. It is an iconic place for the 20-year-old generation, the age that our actors were... It seemed a good way to reflect on this time when you are looking forward to something in life, but in reality, your ambitions are very limited. You go to the *Hedgehog* and purchase *Ikea*... Officially, your life has succeeded, even though there is a void inside you that continues to grow only bigger. And just like Zilov in the play, you are being repeatedly told – "you have everything, what is your problem?"

DIFFERENT WAYS OF SEEING: TOWARDS INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE ART

By Katrīna Rudzīte, anthropologist

Art is an important field of communication and representation. People recognize themselves in features, movements, struggles and dreams of fictional characters. They make sense of their experiences and take comfort in art's abstract dimensions and structures.

But what about the situation, if art for some reason is not available for you – as a viewer, as a participant, as a human being? If it is not possible for you to enjoy an artistic experience, because it takes place in an inaccessible building, you cannot read the subtitles or hear the music being played? What about the situation, if art never reflects your experiences and social circumstances? If you never or painfully rarely recognize features of your life in its content?

Art serves as a strong reflection of what happens in society. It is related to political contexts, no matter whether it has been the author's intention or not, to create a work with a specific political message. As Griselda Pollock would remind us, history with its particular socio-political conditions happens every day, not only when we experience catastrophes, such as war or a pandemic. If someone is left out from the reflection of this history or from history itself, it is a political gesture as well.

This publication proposes a small insight into two works, in which questions of sight and blindness and practical, social and philosophical meanings and the implications of those meanings are explored.



Daiga Gaismaņa, Ainārs Ančevskis in *The Boy Who Saw in the Dark*

The Boy Who Saw in the Dark is a theatre show, directed by Valters Sīlis and written by Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce. In 2019/2020 the performance earned prizes in four categories by annual theater award *Spēlmaņu nakts*. This is a coming-of-age story of a sighted boy, who has been born within a community of the blind, about his complex, loving, but uneasy relationship with his parents, who often need help and care for themselves, and with two worlds – the world of the visually impaired and the world of the sighted. There are outlined challenges and isolation, blind and visually impaired individuals were facing in a relatively small town in the nineties. However, has anything much changed in 2021? At the same time, this is a smart, lively and sincere insight into daily life, lived by people, whose perception of the world is based on sound, touch and smell.



Valters Sīlis

Why was it important for you to stage a performance in which the world of the blind and the visually impaired is revealed?

There were several motives. First of all, I am very much interested in daily life from some very different viewpoints, like how a person, for whom small day-to-day steps suddenly become very difficult, copes with life. For example, a few years ago I staged the play *The Forest Man (Mežainis)*, it was about a man who hid from the Soviet regime. It was extremely difficult for him to visit a dentist. Something that for most of us is probably just rather an unpleasant experience, for him was one of the most exciting adventures in his life – during the mid-1970s secretly going to the dentist, making sure that no one reveals his true identity. When Rasa [Bugavičute-Pēce] told me this story, the thing that resonated with me and to which I could relate to on a very personal level, was the aspect of the relationship with your child. How you cope with the fact that your child is growing up. Only in this particular story, there are specifically challenging circumstances, where you cannot know what your child is able to hide from you. Actually, it always happens like that, a child, while growing up, hides, they do not want to reveal everything to their parents. For a child coming of age is a very hard process, but it is hard for their parents, as well. And in this story, it is even harder, as it might be for sighted parents. It was very important for me to create a work that could be interesting for both: sighted and blind viewers.

In your opinion, how inclusive is contemporary Latvian theatre? In its artistic content and also very practically: how accessible it is for various groups?

Yes... Even the hall where we were showing this work was the New Hall of National Theatre, and for people in wheelchairs it became accessible only three or four years ago, for more than ten years previously it had not been accessible. The situation was such that a new outbuilding was built, but we did not have a space for staging plays there, it was just a warehouse, and then at some point it was decided that we could do something different there. But only a few years ago an extension was built on to this outbuilding, in which also the elevator was built, before that the New Hall had not been accessible for people with limited movement.

If we speak about the artistic side, I have created two such works: one was about a teenage boy with Asperger's syndrome, and then this one. Both were acknowledged by the Ombudsman – I was praised, because I have made such works. Of course, that is very pleasant, but at the same time there is this strange feeling that the very fact that I have created this kind of work is perceived as something special. Though, is it something special? I am questioning this. And I do not have any answers. There is very little of such content in Latvian theatre. This is not usual to speak about these topics. I think that to make such works you have to believe that they will be interesting not only for this small group, but also for the wider audience. This year, in August, we played the show in the Great Hall of National Theatre, and it was full, then we played in *Jūras vārti*, which is a big hall in Ventspils, and it was full, as well. Even in the beginning we had the feeling that this might be interesting for the wider audience, but we still agreed to show this in the New Hall, and luckily, we did, because otherwise the form might have turned out to be less accessible, and we probably would have tried to make a more visual work. But now the visual is used just as much, as to allow for a sighted person to understand what is happening, and everything else is based on sound.

Did you have doubts that a show, where the main focus is put on tools of sound, will not be able to attract a huge audience?

I think some conventions exist, about how the performance that is staged in the big hall should look. Even if you are consciously breaking these conventions, sometimes unconsciously you have this idea that in the big hall there has to be an impressive mise en scène on the stage, all of the space has to be filled with movement, because you have learned that it should be like this. However, in this case I wanted to put a focus on audio, so the visual would just give signs about what is happening, where, but would not create mise en scènes and realistic scenes. And it was not easy for me to constantly remind myself – oh, in this work it is not needed, because we have sound.

Does theatre have the potential to change viewer's attitudes towards social problems or probably even inspire political changes?

There is no way I could measure my influence in this respect (*Laughs.*) However, I am quite sure that this work has been necessary for at least someone. As a comparison I can mention the case from another show of mine, where in one scene a war veteran from Afghanistan appears. It happens in just one scene. But I received a letter, and this man thanked me, because – *we do not see ourselves anywhere*. But now there is at least this one scene. As I already mentioned, I also made a play about a parent's relationship to a boy who has Asperger's syndrome. Afterwards a woman, who also has a son with Asperger's syndrome, wrote to me; she was very grateful, because her husband did not believe that their child has this diagnosis, he thought that he is just lazy and being spoiled, and that is the cause for all of his problems. But then someone else says that this is real. It is told publicly, in theatre, actors say this on stage. In the first place, I think, such works are needed for people, whose personal experience and struggles are reflected in them. And at that moment it also can reach wider circles of society. If someone has not thought about these matters or has a very dismissive attitude, of course, that would not change just by watching one play. Though, for someone who did not understand or did not know, some things might become a bit clearer and more understandable. For example, why we should spend money to make our city more accessible; probably someone can understand that a bit better. And for those who are personally involved, such works could help them to feel a bit less lonely, to show that out there are other people who have similar experiences and struggles, to create some sense of belonging. This, in my view, is one of the main functions of theatre.

What are the aspects that have to be taken in consideration, when creating work about a vulnerable group?

You have to search for a good balance. It is important not to make anything look more beautiful than it is. Not to romanticize. Yes, if we think about some social group, I believe that romanticizing does not help anyone. You have to create real people with real characters, even if these people are somehow different from you. But it is also important not to make anything look more horrible than it is in reality. Another thing, if you are creating a partially documentary work, as it is in the case of *The Boy Who Saw in the Dark*, you have to take into account that this particular group is quite small. These people can know about one another and recognize people in the story. Sometimes there is the situation, when you find a story, which is very interesting, but this story takes place within a very small town; and in your work you would be revealing someone's personal life to everyone else. And then you realize that you should probably back off. This is always important – you have to understand what kind of story you are telling, to whom you are telling it, and how not to harm people. Moreover, there is also this aspect... Someone wrote a comment on Facebook – “such a wonderful show, but it is a pity it was not played by people who are visually impaired”. And then you start to think – this could be done, but how? How could I do it in the National Theatre? The system is yet far from this to be possible. We are far from the situation in which a professional education in stage arts would be available to blind individuals who would like to work in theatre themselves. These are also the questions that surface. And sometimes you yourself do not even notice such things and do not start to contemplate them. They get noticed by someone else, who has personal experience with what you have shown in your work.



Labrys by IevaKrish

Labrys+, created by dancers Ieva Gaurilčikaite and Krišjānis Sants, is a piece of choreography, where music, imagined geometrical figures and strange words build a network of sensual communication. This work, still in the creation process, is a transformation of an already existing piece named *Labrys*. But this time the experience of the show will take place in complete darkness; all members of the audience will have their eyes blindfolded. The blind viewers will find themselves in the middle of a moving labyrinth.

In contemporary dance the visual perception is often very important. How did you decide to transform your performance in such a way that various tools of sound would dominate, making the experience of the performance more accessible for people who are blind or visually impaired. Why was this important to you?

Ieva Gaurilčikaite-Sants: I would not even say that the idea was to make *Labrys* accessible. We rather wanted to enhance it or to give some other quality to it. Moreover, ideas about what to create are formed also by what funding you can get. *KultūrELPA* funded accessible artworks, so we decided that this is the right moment to enhance this work.

Krišjānis Sants: But there is an important factor – it was not just any work. In the very material of *Labrys* lies a potential that this performance could be perceived not-visually, and therefore it became possible to make it accessible for people, who cannot or for whom it is not that important to perceive it visually. This possibility stems from the material of this particular work. This is actually not so much a dance show, but rather a piece of choreography. Sound has been choreographed within the space, sound moves along with dancers, who exercise this choreography. In this way a performance becomes a spatial composition of sound. And only afterwards we found out that there existed a methodology to make any work of conventional dance accessible to people who cannot see it.

Since KultūrELPA was mentioned, I would like to ask you: in your opinion, if accessibility of art would usually be an important priority in Latvian cultural policy, not just in one project competition, would we have more accessible artworks?

Krišjānis: I think, definitely. There are so many things that you would like to do and try out, but sometimes it is very helpful if the creators of cultural policy say – “okay, for now on we should think more about this particular matter” – and in *KultūrELPA* that is accessibility. And we say – “okay, this is something we ourselves have already thought about for some time and would like to work on”. I do not want to argue that an artist is only following political orders, but, on the other hand, it is not possible to focus your attention on every important topic. So,

there is no doubt if funding on a regular basis would be attached to accessible art projects, we would have much more accessible art.

Ieva: That would be quite good, if it would be like that. To be honest, I have lived, I am not sure how to best put it, a very exclusive life, often it has not even crossed my mind that the art I was making was inaccessible to someone. And now I am starting to think that ideally any artwork should be accessible.

Krišjānis: From my point of view, also this one time possibility to get funding is quite worthy, because it invites artists to start thinking in this direction. When we will make our next works, we will keep in mind the accessibility aspect. At the same time, it is not possible to create a work which is equally interesting for everyone.

Ieva: But, I think, in this case, this is not even about the work being interesting, this is about – that if you have the interest about a particular work, you have the possibility to see this work, to come and be there, and have this experience.

Sometimes the problem might be that, when you make something more accessible to one group, it may become less accessible to another group. What are the main challenges you encounter, working on *Labrys+*?

Krišjānis: One challenge possibly lies in what you just mentioned, we have not yet thought about how interesting or perceivable this work might be for deaf and partially hearing audiences.

Ieva: A big challenge is also to find the right venue. To think about where to show this work.

Krišjānis: Yes, because in the beginning we thought that it was important to choose a space with good acoustics, and which is warm enough. But then we started to think also about the fact that visually impaired and blind viewers have to get to the venue. And getting there should be as easy as possible. Yes, one of the greatest challenges now is figuring out how to organize the performance in the space, which is properly equipped and at the same time – central enough to be easily accessed. There are challenges, which yet lie ahead of us. For example, when the premiere will come closer we will have to figure out how to reach our targeted audience. Though, this work is not only for blind and visually impaired audiences, and we will not promote it like that, instead we will say that we have created a work which is not meant to be perceived visually, and we will also note that before the performance all members of the audience will be blindfolded. But still, we will have to make sure that the blind and visually impaired community finds out that such a show will take place. We have also considered that we could probably organize some guest performances in some locations, which are typical gathering places for the visually impaired and blind community. At the same time, they are not that one, big homogeneous group, where

everyone spends time together in a particular place. And, after all, the goal is to break the bubble and encourage people to go somewhere else.

Ieva: Yes, not to separate one group from another, but to create a possibility to meet each other and to be together.

How important is the narrative and whether the audience can understand it? What is the meaning of labyrinth in this work, and has its meaning somehow transformed in the new version of the performance?

Krišjānis: It is important to note that we have recently invented such a term as “abstracturgy” in our inner lexicon; it is an alternative for the concept of dramaturgy. If dramaturgy is a composition of dramatic work, then abstracturgy is a composition of abstract material. This is the way we are thinking lately, we are trying to create experiences, where meaning can be sensed and felt, but is not verbally communicated. There is a very beautiful word in English – tacit. Silent, unspecified communication. It is specific, but not specifically about something. It is clearly felt, but it could not be taught, it could be only experienced. This appears in various works we have made. Also in this case, we believe that it is possible to come and listen to this performance as a spatial work of sound, in our understanding this work in a way is much closer to music than to dance, although the music dances around you. However, if we have to somehow describe or explain this experience, labyrinth is the shape of it. You are hearing this work of sound from within; each viewer is sitting on their stool, while the labyrinth of the sound concurrently appears and vanishes all around them. That is one reason why we call this a labyrinth – because viewers find themselves inside of it.

Ieva: I think that a labyrinth is a very well organized place, if you are watching it from above. But when you are inside, it is quite easy to get lost. But speaking about the narrative, this is my, as a co-author's view: I like the fact that people, watching, listening and experiencing our work, get carried away in their own imagination, they dream about the future or, perhaps, about the past, those are such abstract sensations and associations. And it is not very important that a particular narrative would be perceived, because the narrative forms within a viewer.

Krišjānis: An act of non-verbal artistic experience is important for us. We want the viewer to experience something which cannot be put into words. However, as we are still in the middle of the creation process, we have to leave some question marks. For example, there are a couple of stories by Borges where the feeling of being inside of a labyrinth is revealed. We could probably use them, take some excerpts from them and include them into our material. Since the visual part is taken away we are considering adding not only the music, but, perhaps, also to try to create some fictional dimension.

ON FEMINISM IN LATVIAN STAGE ARTS

By Jana Kukaine, feminist scholar

The selection of performances offers a unique insight into the development of feminist aesthetics and consciousness in Latvia's stage art. It comprises attempts to negotiate contradictions and overcome ambiguities inherent in post-socialist feminism, as well as aspirations to foster intergenerational and cross-cultural encounters in broader contexts. Apart from conceptual engagements, feminist commitments and ethics have influenced also the production of the performances, with visible scepticism towards the cult of (a male) genius, the master creator and other similar vertical structures. Instead, these artists have endorsed horizontal relationships based on the idea of equal partnership and co-creative collaboration. For that reason, their work has preserved the atmosphere of openness, lightness and multiple

possibilities that I believe most audiences will appreciate. *A Voice from the Bel Etage* is a good example of building feminist genealogies. It establishes points of convergence with both local (like the forgotten composer Felicita Tomson) and international (like the suffragette Emily Davison) historical figures, as well as revisits the canon of cultural heritage, by rereading the female character Barbara from a famous Rainis' play (where she is usually represented as a passive victim). The work is rich with cultural references that perhaps only local audiences can fully decipher, nonetheless, its free spirit has a rather universal appeal.

A different approach is employed by *Routine of Fear* and *Physical Evidence Museum*. While echoing the development of the international *Me Too* movement, both performances materialize untold stories based on the evidence provided by local women and their experience. By merging documentary eloquence, poetic metaphors and therapeutic effects, these performances

cautiously break silences around gender-based violence in artistically subtle and stimulating ways, exploring its vernacular expressions and effects.

Finally, the classic question "What is a woman?" is daringly addressed by the creators of *Femina* – the question that has had many answers, none of them definitive. The performance researches the constructions of femininity and traces how gender determines representation, embodiment and everyday experiences in contemporary Latvian society, when women are still expected to shut up and look sexy.

Thus, the selection of the performances indicates an optimistic development in Latvia's stage art, winning through the reluctance and even fears of feminism typical of the region. Feminism proves to be a versatile artistic perspective, capable of opening up a variety of unanswered questions and fresh perspectives engaging not only with local, but also international audiences.

DISCLOSURE AS A PROCESS

Dance artist Jana Jacuka and dramaturg Laura Stašāne started to explore the subject of domestic violence in Latvia in 2019. They have worked together for two pieces that are both included in the 2021 Showcase. *Routine of Fear* is a solo piece about a young woman's fears as she is growing up which is Jana's personal story. *Physical Evidence Museum* is a documentary work where the stories of violence are told with the help of different objects that are donated to this project by women who have experienced domestic abuse. This project has already taken place in Latvia, Estonia and Poland.



Laura Stašāne, Jana Jacuka

Before *Routine of Fear*, you had a piece *Everything will be alright* – was it also about women's experiences?

Jana Jacuka: First of all, it was about my experience. And as I'm a woman, it was also about women's experience, but mainly in connection to childhood. In this performance I also mention my father, but in *Routine* I mention him more.

Laura Stašāne: I think *Everything will be alright* was a typical coming of age story. *Routine* is as well, but in a different way. In *Everything will be alright* you were speaking cautiously about it. It was more of a story about a father-daughter relationship, which was not a great one, but I didn't hear any undertones that appeared in the process of *Routine of Fear*. You vaguely mentioned something that seemed to have an important role in your life, but only later you brought out the heavy artillery.

Jana: Well, yes... *Routine* was made because I had a feeling that I had started talking, but I didn't say everything I wanted. Because it was very difficult, and I was scared. At that time, I had not yet realized that what happened to me as a child was violence. I didn't know if it could be called that specifically. I grew in the process of these performances. And I had a feeling that I have something more to say, and I went to Laura saying "we need to try it again, but go deeper this time".

How did you work on this show? Did you study this topic?

Jana: It happened in very close collaboration with Laura throughout the process. I started by listing down the fears that I had. And then I realized that my list was really long. There were some mundane fears, existential fear, fear related to the previous traumatic experience,

all kinds of different levels. But Laura tried to encourage me to reveal more, to look for a reason – why I had all these fears.

It is probably one of the first performances in Latvia that addresses women's fear in a feminist way, where it talks about the fear of one gender, not just one person or one case. And it comes really late, only in 2020. Why do you think you have started talking about it now?

Jana: Well, I think it is because a lot of women around me have started sharing their experiences, the media is starting to talk about it. Because there has been *Me Too*, and it makes you feel more secure. It seems to me that if someone else hadn't started talking, I wouldn't have been able to.

Laura: It is funny that you mention *Me Too*, although *Me Too* didn't really happen in Latvia. It is also a phenomenon worth analysing and making work about. We went to Warsaw and Tallinn with the *Physical Evidence Museum* – and they have had *Me Too* there, at least to some degree. When I said that we hadn't had it, everyone asked – "why?" and I still don't have the answer.

Jana: I remember from personal experience that I didn't want to talk about my experience on stage yet. But Laura encouraged me, she said it was valuable, that it could help other women. So, basically the encouragement did not come from the outside environment, but it came very personally from Laura. For the first time in my life there was someone saying that what happened to me was not okay and that I needed to talk about it. I imagine if someone had told me that at that age, I would have thought... it would have been easier now. I was only encouraged to talk about that for the first time when I was 24.

Laura: *Routine* started as a personal work about Jana, not about a global phenomenon. We were looking for ways

to talk about it. When we started this work, I didn't know the whole story, and it only really appeared when Jana...

Jana: ... encountered a creative crisis.

Laura: When she got to the point where you can't go on without revealing it. Initially, it remained on the same level all the time – she was talking about her fears and not saying why she had them. And I asked if we could take a step back. Jana protested. And only when she revealed it... I started to research the numbers and statistics in Latvia and globally. Because *Me Too* and domestic violence are two different things. It is harder to talk about domestic violence than about violence at work where you are talking about a stranger. In the family, it is a person who is still close to you. And when I understood the statistics, it took us to the next work – the *Physical Evidence Museum*. It all started with a very personal, fragile story about openness, in which it was important not to create another trauma for Jana.

And how do you do that? How do you maintain your integrity and sanity during the process?

Laura: We were just talking about that... because I feel traumatized, too. It is not easy. I asked the specialists at the *Marta Centre* and the Estonian specialists what to do. Many professionals who work with these questions are coming to our shows, and they are excited about the way we approach this topic, because they haven't found a way to talk without showing the victims' faces. And when I ask them about self-preservation and self-care, they say that it's hard to maintain the balance.

Jana: I really wanted to make *Routine of Fear* because I wanted everyone to hear, I couldn't stand the silence. The family doesn't talk about it, they pretend as if nothing happened. We live in an environment where you can't tell anyone, because you are immediately blamed for complaining. But I realized that I had the stage, I could get on it and tell the audience, and that they would listen



Jana Jacuka in *Routine of Fear*



Agate Bankava, Agnese Bordjukova, Inta Balode in *A Voice from the Bel Etage* by Laukku

to me, because they had paid for the ticket. And they give me that opportunity. And in the *Physical Evidence Museum* project we can provide this opportunity to other women. They can have a stage, and people will listen... But we never push anyone, we work very carefully. Those who are ready to speak and have this desire to speak, can do so and benefit from the therapeutic aspect of this process. We are open to giving this opportunity to others, but we never push anyone.

Laura: But in the end, there was a great responsiveness. I think there was something in the air, the time was ripe for talking about these issues, which was not two years ago. And many related events took place last year. The theme of the annual charity campaign *Dod Pieci* was domestic violence. The *Re:Baltika* series, the lockdown effect, which exacerbated the violence against women. The Marta Centre said that the number of calls has increased by many times, and the same for the *Skalbes* crisis telephone hotline.

This is one of the first performances in Latvia about women's fear from the feminist or the gender perspective... There have been some visual works or texts about it. Were you looking for new movements to express the women's fear in the dance language?

Jana: I think that in this performance the most important thing is what I'm saying. The text. It is important for me to say it out loud, not to just dance, not to hide again. Here's a woman coming up to the stage and saying "I'm afraid". Pure fact. At the same time, the stage and the movements give me the opportunity to create different atmospheres for the audience. We can dive into memories and not lose the abstract side and the paradoxes that art can bring.

Laura: I think it was important to show that the person has much more to express apart from this one story. I think *Routine* conveys this idea. But speaking of universal gestures that express a woman's feeling... for example, there is this one moment, when Jana beautifully stands like Botticelli's Venus in a completely inappropriate situation when she is talking about rape. And it conveys something archetypally ancient about the humiliation of women.

Do you use the word "rape"? In literature we read "seduced", "oppressed" etc. The rape is often replaced with a very general, meaningless word.

Jana: When we were making *Routine of Fear*. I was having a hard time with these words...

Laura: For Jana, the one who did it was a "he".

Jana: And Laura asked me – can you say "my father" today? No, I can't. A week later she asked me again. And in the third week, I could say that. It is a process that you must go through. In *Routine*, I said as much as I could. But when

I talked about my grandma I said "the soldiers have their needs", but still, the idea is clear. But in the *Physical Evidence Museum*, things were already labelled with the right words. Many women were okay to use these words.

Laura: Not too many. It came only with experience in Latvia, they rarely called it "violence", "rape", "beating".

Jana: But in Poland, they spoke very concretely – "he beat me", "raped me", "strangled me".

Laura: Yes, in Latvia the participants were much more poetic about it... and it gave that special vibe to the *Museum* – when it is clear what they talk about, but nothing is said directly.

Do you think it is because we are a small society who keeps their secrets "in the family"?

Jana: When I was working on *Routine*, my sister asked me "are you going to talk about us again?" I run into the fact that the family doesn't support what I'm doing. I had to overstep it. Because it turns out that I exhibit not only myself, but also my relatives. They were also involved...

Laura: And this is what sustains the violence – we have a feeling that we need to protect our family members at all times. And in the end, you are protecting the abuser, and they feel they can continue to act the same way because their secret is protected. And so, it becomes a vicious circle.

What is the social function of fear? Do you think it can become a political driving force?

Jana: Fear is a very good tool for the abusers. I was brought up to always be afraid and to worry about everything. I was double-checking everything 100 times before I said or did something. Fear is a very effective tool. Because when one is afraid, the other can be the authority.

I think we were all raised that way. In an environment where people are afraid to talk, it is easy to control them.

Laura: There is always a question behind fear – who has the power in this society? Who is not just physically stronger, but whose stories do we hear? There is a part of society whose stories we don't hear because they are afraid to talk about them. And this is the wall I would like to break. To overcome the very first fear – the fear of talking... about your fears. To come on the stage and realize that you are being listened to. The more women would feel this, the more it would become viewed as normal to talk about the violence. At least a mom and daughter could discuss it more freely. This is not something that can be solved right away, because the acquisition and retention of a power position is in human nature.

It's a tricky one, because we are taught what is in human nature. The science behind it is mainly written by men.

Laura: I remember when I was reading Svetlana Alexievich's book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, there was one narrator, one woman who had been in the war, she said her husband had been training her on how to talk about the war. He had pulled out the maps and made her remember the names of the battlefields and equipment. But she says, "I forgot all that, I'll tell you what I remember." The man had spent the whole morning teaching her, but she tells how it was... Because the constructed narratives collapse when you have human contact. When there is a person who listens. While reading the book, I was waiting for the writer herself to show up in the text. But over time I realized that she was the medium, the mouthpiece for these stories. I now fully understand her role, which means simply stepping back and letting these stories resonate, not trying to impose your views. This was also the principle we used for the *Physical Evidence Museum* – just to let those voices be heard. Instead of creating a new material from these stories, which would be the classic approach to creating a work of art. On the contrary, I thought they were the experts, they deserved the stage and we created it for them.

ONE OPERA LOST, THREE VOICES FOUND

A Voice from the Bel Etage first premiered in Latvia at the end of August 2021. It was an unprecedented event in Latvian performing arts, a feminist musical performance created out of archive materials, pseudo-scientific statements, fragments of literary works and all kinds of opinions wandering in the public space. Intended to reach peripheral areas and various members of the public in Latvia, the original work by Laukku demonstrated a free play with genres and forms, mixing different levels of text, academic and experimental music and contemporary dance. A conversation with one of the choreographers of the performance Agata Bankava, and the dramaturg Maija Treile.

What does the word Laukku stand for?

Agate Bankava: *Laukku* is a group of like-minded people, all kinds of artists and people who practice the art of living. It is an association of people that spend time together and create artworks together. "Laukku" means "travel bag" in Finnish and it relates to "lauku" meaning "rural" in Latvian, because we are interested in artworks created in peripheral areas, outside the big cities. The association was created by Finnish philosopher Max Ryyänen and some other Latvian and French artists, and various other international artists have joined it over the time.

Who are the three women at the centre of the show – what archetypal images do they represent?

Maija Treile: We found this during the process of rehearsals, which was very democratic and which, due to the circumstances, took place mostly online. The process was very gradual, and I got involved in it a little later, when the choreographers had already figured out that the show would be about women's rights and gender equality. As we were making a musical show, we decided

in our collective chat, because now this information environment is so global and vast.

Agate: I would say that in the end the performance has a spiral shape. While we were reading and gathering the information for a longer time, it became visible that historically there was a return to similar conditions all the time.

And how does it resonate with the musical?

We have gained a voice, but what kind of ideology do we spread with it?

to look for a woman composer in the history of Latvian music who has sunk into oblivion. We had a consultation with music reviewer Orests Silabriedis, and one of his recommendations was Felicita Tomsonē. And she has composed the opera *Blow, winds!* after Rainis' play, the most notable classic of Latvian literature. So Rainis came into play with his protagonist Barba, whom we call Barbara by her full name, not one of the nicknames that Rainis called her. While working with the various materials, also English suffragette Emily Davison appeared and kind of encompassed everything related to women's rights in history. We wanted to talk about the women's voice literally and figuratively, and these three images seemed a good fit.

Felicita Tomsonē, relatively, was given a voice, because she is the first Latvian female composer whose opera was staged in the Latvian National Opera even though she was already 59 when the premiere took place. At the same time, we do not find her voice in the protocols, she was very criticized, her work was instrumentalized by her husband, which is a normal working process... But it presents a message about the woman's place in society. Barbara, on the other hand, is a wonderful example of how to get a woman off the stage, by transforming her into a symbol, into a Mother Latvia or the shy girl. Emily Davison is the archetype of a woman-fighter who is most associated with feminists, which perhaps represents the stage in the history when not only voice, but only the physical manifestation was necessary.

All three of them are also victims of different types...

Maija: We tried very hard not to take on the role of victim. They are victims of circumstances, but we wanted to go further and give them the power to choose and take action. Because the victim's position is a passive position. For example, Rainis' Barbara is traditionally treated as an etheric, ethically clear being. I have also seen stage interpretations where her sexual awakening played the central role. But we saw her as a savage teenage cat who grew up in the wilderness and who gets into physical and sexual danger. And we studied Rainis' remarks, where she bites and screams a lot, and behaves completely differently from this ideal with her blue anemone-like eyes.

How did you divide the roles?

Agate: I'm Emily Davison on stage, but of course it changes during the show, because there are many layers, and in other scenes we are no longer exactly these three heroines, but the cute chicks or the warriors. It was set from the beginning that everyone would do what might be most difficult for them. That is why Inta Balode has the role of Felicita Tomsonē, which is a silent role that never expresses anything verbal, and Agnese Bordjukova has the role of Barbara, which is quite complex – ethereal, but wild at the same time.

Your performance consists of opinions circulating in the media and public sphere, newspaper articles, fragments of literary works. What do they represent?

Agate: The selection was very long. In each stage of the process, we were looking for different information, so there is everything from stereotypical views to historical information and scientific research. It is easy to recognize the popular talk shows with women.

Maija: These views and passages are selected on a very wide scale of time. We read books like Freud's *Femininity* and Aristotle's *Poetics* as patriarchal cornerstones to contemporary articles. Every week we had a different theme and put things that are related to this topic

Maija: We wanted to keep the pop side of the musical and turn it in a slightly paradoxical, contemporary direction. At the same time, the fact that it was a musical allowed us to use more direct signs and exaggerated slogan-like ideas. But it was also important for us to leave enough questions. It was a balancing act between a musical show that we perform with certain means that would not be imaginable in a traditional musical, but we also use some open structures that would not be in a typical musical either.

Why was it important for you to talk about gender equality?

Agate: I know that I have had the desire to talk about it before, but I was not ready to talk about it. In Latvia, I have encountered situations in the professional environment, when as a woman I am looked at differently. And other choreographers have experienced that as well and thought that should talk about it.

Maija: I myself had a personal interest in this subject. Yes, women can get educated and can vote or work in an important position in the field of culture – there is no problem there at all, because these are relatively poorly paid positions... But in certain situations there are some stereotypes that determine my own actions. It's not that I couldn't use my voice, but I choose not to use it or I speak in a whining pitch. It is very typical to say that feminist issues are not a problem in Latvia, since women are in leading positions. But there is a problem about this attitude that is almost infiltrated in women. Yes, we have gained a voice, but what kind of ideology do we spread with it?

Agate: During the process, we discovered that women themselves are much more demanding towards other women than towards men. I caught myself doing it too... and started wondering why?

Maija: To be honest, since I have a daughter, I realize... that I accept some patterns of behaviour if they are used against me, but if I imagine that they would be used against my daughter, then it no longer seems acceptable.

Agate: It was similar also with our composer, whose daughter was born during this time. He said he wouldn't want his daughter to have this experience.

The performances took place mainly in non-central locations. How do you choose them?

Agate: First of all, it is the principle of *Laukku* that we go to the periphery. We knew that we wanted to show in Matiši, almost all were places where we had already had cooperation or where there were some colleagues. And we had to be outdoors because of Covid. And there were some places that would take the show, but they said that feminism is not a problem in Latvia and they don't know who might be interested in this show.

And did the public come?

Agate: Due to various restrictions, the rows were full, not crowded, though. There was a very interesting audience in Jūrmala – they were passers-by, people whom we've never met before. And they came after the show and had some comments. For example, about the cute chicks' scene that "those fools you portrayed are the biggest problem – there are too many girls like them". So, it is interesting how this topic resonates with different people.

What are the relations between text, choreography and music in this show?

Maija: Already in the early process we realized that we want to create a work about the relationship between these levels. We worked together with the choreographer and set-designer, and the composer Platons Buravickis and musicians were involved later. We purposefully thought about the scenes where there would be a struggle

between the movement and the sound.

Later talking to the audience, we could see who the people are who follow more at the text level and who follow the choreography. In the show there were things that were said and things that were shown with the movements, we repeat lines or illustrate what was said. For example, Barba's story is largely expressed through movement, but some people didn't read it. It is the question of different perceptions. The fact is that the text has always dominated and it is a serious issue in performing arts. Just as patriarchy has dominated society for hundreds of years, text has dominated the performing arts. We talk about it using a lot of text, but it is not meant to understand every word, it appears as fragments.

Agate: I think that the text with the dance went hand in hand, because the movement often took the impulse from the text and vice versa. However, the collaboration with the composer was more such that we gave him the material, and he admitted that this was one of the most difficult processes. Maybe Felicita Tomsonē was holding him by the throat. The material was very diverse, and many admitted that it was unexpected work from Platons. Probably because it was a musical, probably because our movements were sometimes very concrete, sometimes abstract.

Do you think the abstract movement can convey the message as directly as the text?

Agate: It probably depends on each [piece and] artist individually. Personally, I think that dance can reveal much more. Because the viewer also has a body and can feel these kinaesthetic things through the body, movement can pierce the heart or any other part of the body in a way that words would never be able to. I have experienced it as a spectator. So, for me dancing would probably be more direct.

Maija: I think we feel more through physiology. Like in the scene where they are birthing logs – you can really feel this image. The texts are compiled according to the principle of collage to form a dialogue with each other. We also speak very directly, but these are often speculations that may irritate the public, which is not bad – if the viewer is irritated, he can think more about why something seemed annoying or manipulative. It was important for us not to prioritize any of these levels – textual, physical, visual, musical, but to form questions by combining them. The questioning is important in this show.

What audience did you want to reach?

Agate: I wanted the show to reach as many women of all types and ages as possible. Also men. But the question of the audience always confuses me, because I somehow don't have a specific group for whom my works are intended. During the process, I was communicating about these topics with my peers, and I think there are a lot of people who no longer attach any importance to the fact that women can vote or get an education. I kind of wanted to say: "hey! we can do it and that we shouldn't lose these rights". There are other women who stand up for it, and they may not feel supported enough. They need motivation to keep up the good work.

Maija: The concept of *Laukku* is to reach a more distant and atypical audience. We had very young children in the performance in Melluži and also many seniors came to the show in Matiši. I encountered my own stereotypes, for example, when in Matiši, a village with a few hundred inhabitants, the public arrived long before the show had started. These were elderly people all dressed up in evening gowns. I had some concerns about how our show would be perceived, but it was one of the most successful. In Riga, there was a more or less typical audience of intellectuals and visitors of cultural events who probably watched the show more ironically. There was the largest hall, and the show was more edgy. In Matiši, it was much softer and more sincere. But for me, Melluži was the perfect place, because the show took place somehow unexpectedly. We showed it on the park lawn, without seats, in cold weather, almost like the street musicians. Some of the spectators had come on purpose, but many were just accidental passers-by who stayed. Around 40 people of all ages stayed until the end, and after the show they left good reviews both in person and on social networks. It was less important to me that the show would be seen by women who have established feminist views already. I wanted to reach people who don't really think about the questions of gender equality. Not that they are hostile towards feminism, but they don't consider that it applies to their lives. And I think we managed to meet enough of these audiences to see that the show accomplishes its aim.

Laura Gorodko in *Femina*

QUEST FOR THE SUPERWOMAN'S GENE

The interview with the author and choreographer of contemporary dance performance *Femina* Sabine Neilande took place several weeks before the premiere. The performance is a manifestation of the dual and contradictory image of a woman in society and culture, which significantly influences how modern women perceive themselves. Inspired by many examples in the art world and her personal experience, dancer Laura Gorodko invites the viewer to go on a transformative journey through the various skins that surround her in this man-made world.



Sabine Neilande

Is *Femina* one of those performances that will be ready only when it connects with the viewer?

As in all performances, the viewer is definitely important, and we want to see their reaction, if the idea and our message has been conveyed. Because working in our team and meeting each other every day, we are on the same page, but we don't know about the public and how they relate to this topic. But this will not be an interactive performance, the viewer will not be very integrated, even though that was the original idea. Due to the Covid pandemic, participation is not possible. Instead, we will include interviews with various women that will be shown before the show, and also in the pitch. In the team we are all classmates, girls of the same age, we see this topic only from one perspective. It was interesting to listen to how this topic looks from a different side and to include other people's experiences.

And what differences did you notice in other people's attitudes?

We have already shown the work in progress of this show in the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art Summer Program and in the festival *Vides dejas*, and we came to the same conclusion as we did by interviewing other women – there are many things we haven't considered to be a problem, we haven't paid that much attention to... maybe it's not even right to call it a problem? But

here are some things that people don't often think about. For example, how women are portrayed in art. 85% of the nudes exhibited in the museums are women's naked bodies. She is mainly represented as an object, or as this weak, naive, beautiful being – always the same way. But now looking at the pictures on social networks – nothing much has changed. On Instagram or anywhere else, many women are showing themselves as objects, they are putting themselves in the same place where some male artist has placed them, because it looks beautiful... and it is beautiful, but...

Are you trying to change this situation with your show?

We have these very intensive stages of work when our director Naubertas Jasinskas arrives from Lithuania. In the process of creating the show, we came to the conclusion that the deeper we dig, the more absurd everything starts to look, and we don't even see the end of it. How could it ever change? That's our conclusion for the moment. But we believe that things are moving forward. The more conscientious decisions are made, the better we set the example for the next generation of girls, women and people in general. It's not just about women, but about how people perceive each other in general. The change will take a long time. We have Soviet parents, and the Soviet upbringing still affects us. However, it is nice to see that each new generation thinks a little differently.

We do not want to say that everything is just bad. The problem lies where we subconsciously say and repeat some stereotypes. If it is conscious, it is already a change, it is your choice. We want to emphasize that you have a choice. You may like the woman in the painting, how lovingly and naively she stands there, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you have to be the same way. You don't have to obey everyone. You have to feel comfortable in your own skin, and not to wear one that is imposed.

Did you address similar topics also in your previous works?

This is the first dance performance I'm working on since graduation, and also the first feminist work. I really wanted to create a choreographic work, but for three years I couldn't figure out what I wanted to talk about. I don't have such a strong opinion about something, which I could certainly defend. The idea didn't come for a long time. But then I tried to step back and think about the smaller issues – about things that worry me, that I'm not comfortable with. Also, when I was meeting with my colleagues, I realized that they have similar emotions and that we could have a deeper conversation about it. I have never been able to do what I'm told to do. I wanted to keep my own opinion and say: "hey, that's what I am and I do as I want".

Your video trailer has this very particular sound "aiiii", like a moan that comes from a woman. What does it express?

There will be different sounds in the show. The music and soundtrack have been created in collaboration with musician Līva Dumpe. We performed various

The more conscientious decisions are made, the better we set the example for the next generation of girls, women and people in general

tasks together so that the dancer Laura Gorodko and Līva started to feel each other and feel free together. Sometimes it is Līva who follows the movement with her sound, sometimes the movement follows Līva's music and voice. She works a lot with her voice, there will be many vocals. "Aiiii" stands for many different things, also very random ones. I like working with Līva because she allows that sound to remain abstract enough so that each listener can put their own explanation in it, to hear what she or he needs to hear.

How does a male director enter your team and the feminine theme?

We first assembled our team and realized that we wanted to play with this cliché, that a woman should always be behind a man, because the final word belongs to him. That's how we invited a male director. He is from Lithuania. We wanted to have more collaborations, create new networks. But, of course, in real life, when we create a show, we work hand in hand and are not behind him. We wanted us to have a man's view, so we wouldn't go wrong. We wanted to make the show more understandable to more people. Because you hear a lot of people saying that they don't understand contemporary dance, that it's too abstract. We wanted to give some tools to the audience to understand it, but we won't feed them all the information with a spoon.

The feminist perspective may encourage other people to speak about their feelings and inner world.

We realized that there was a great deal of duality... in everything, in life. As much as we want to be strong, independent women, we sometimes may enjoy being cared about or even if someone opens the door for us. You may want to be both strong and feel like you're taken care of at the same time. As much as I want to explain my views about something, I want to remain silent about something else and allow everything to happen on its own. It is important to think more and find the right moment, moment and topic for each particular person. But when you dare to say something, inspire others, they realize – hey! I can also talk about something that is dear to me or worries me. And it is the most important and beautiful thing in this project.

WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE SPEAK UP

Krista Burāne is a Latvian artist who works in such artistic fields as theatre, documentary film, and cross-disciplinary. In her theatre work she emphasizes the necessity to collaborate with the audience and to create space and time for mutual conversation. The show *End of The World and Other Nonsense* that is included in the Latvian Theatre Showcase pitching programme premiered at the Valmiera Summer Theatre Festival 2021. It is a participatory audio performance that explores the relationship between man and nature and takes place in an empty school. It has 5 different routes where viewers can visit classrooms, the library, the gym, the wardrobe, the canteen, etc. while listening to the stories about the end of the world written and recited by children.



Krista Burāne

Lately, you are one of the first Latvian stage directors who comes to mind when thinking about contemporary theatre for young people.

I think my field has always been more about documentary and participatory performances, but it is also true that throughout the 10 years since I was involved in theatre, among other arts, young audiences have been important for me. Together with Mārtiņš Eihe we have created many performances for children and young people where I participated more as a playwright and sometimes as a director. Our first cooperation was in 2008 on a piece called *Crazy* by Benjamin Lebert, then *Battle by...* with Liepāja Theatre. Then we founded the creative association *Nomadi* whose main focus was on young audiences, as well as the theatre festival *NoMad!*, which we managed to organize five times.

But how did you get into this role?

When I studied philosophy, the topic of my research was philosophy for children. Also later for quite a long time I was working with children and teachers, both researching and teaching how to think about philosophical issues in the process of education, how to develop critical and creative thinking, and emotional intelligence, and, on the other hand, how to build a more humane, equal, just, caring society through joint research. And my motivation has not changed since then. Working in theatre, cinema or other arts, I am convinced that we have to work very seriously and responsibly with children and young people, if we want this society to become more friendly towards nature and towards each other. It has become clear that schools cannot deal with all the responsibilities that are imposed on them... especially regarding the values, creative thinking, imagination – everything that lies behind the knowledge and is extremely important for a person to better understand themselves, to learn to live more happily, to cooperate and not hurt others. And I feel that theatre and art have a lot to do with this. But it was also a personal desire, I wanted my kids to have a cool school, a cool theatre to go to, nice companions with whom it would be interesting and safe to grow up and live together.

You have also worked together with British director Andy Fields who is well-known for his young people's theatre.

We haven't collaborated on a children's project or consciously talked or theorized about it. He has rather inspired me in an indirect way. It is encouraging that his works for young people and artistic solutions are recognized and internationally appreciated. Because in Latvia, there is still a tendency to push children's theatre away from the big stage. In the *Spēlmaņu Nakts* awards

there is a small form, a large form and children and teenage categories. I do not remember any single case when children's performance would have been nominated as large or small form performances. Those works are not inferior works of art, but they are still deprived of the opportunity to be taken into account.

But for your work *The Immorals* (2019) you were nominated in six different categories.

And I felt very honoured to receive the award for the best play in the teenage category and for the original dramaturgy. It was a big success, it was an interesting work, quite an unusual format that consisted of 3 months research conducted in the school together with the 8th graders, and that worked very well for the audience of the same age group. We worked together with the young poets and poets who were involved in processes related to the censorship of works of art caused by the 2015 amendments to the morality law on education. We were giving voices to young people whose moral upbringing had become such a contested issue in the educational and political processes. We tried to understand why somebody thinks they are immoral, why somebody has to teach them the right morals. Moreover, these changes to the morality law were very one-sidedly aimed at convincing that the family can only be in one form between a man and a woman and that there is no need to talk about sexual education. And teachers become like grains between millstones, trying to praise all the whims and reforms made by politicians. They become exhausted and angry, although they have such a huge responsibility towards children and society.

But now it is 2021 and things regarding censorship and morality issues have gotten only worse.

Unfortunately, yes. It seemed to me then that the language in the show had to be the language of poetry, because it could say a lot more, transmitting all the undertones and overtones, which might not sound so important when spoken directly... These topics related to social or political activism are not often addressed in the language of art. There are some artists who do this, but I feel pretty lonely in the process. And it is also clear that one voice cannot change much, especially in a small-scale theatre or in the festival format, where it only reaches a small audience.

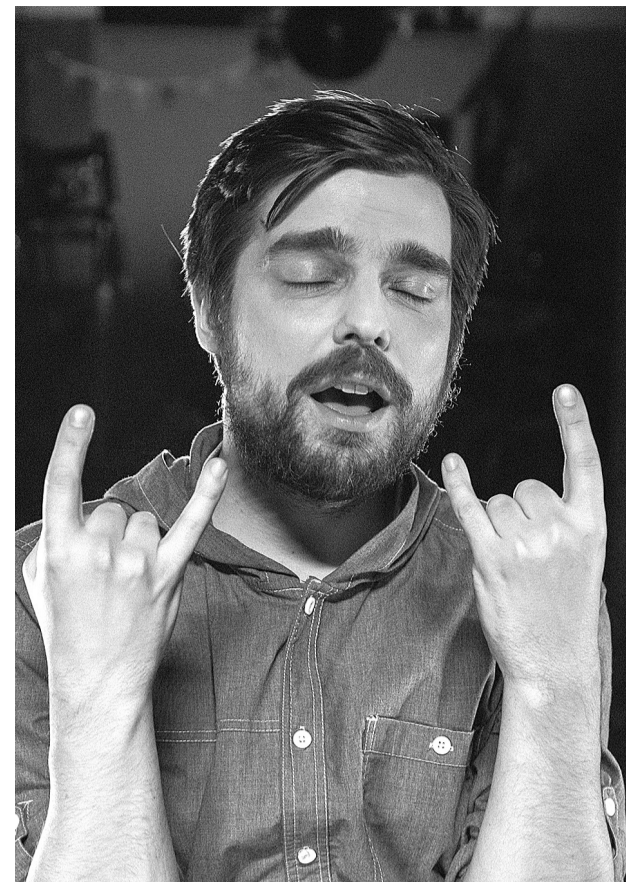
Do you try to get out of this bubble with your new work?

My new work *End of the world and other nonsense* (2021) was created at the school, together with teenagers and it also took place in the school environment. In this process we were exploring the current ecosystem crisis and I invited them to write fantasy stories about the end of the world and salvage. These scenarios arise from the place where we are in, thus the environment in which they learn in a way intertwines with those specific thoughts that emerge. The strongest point of the show is how we put this vision of the future in today's situation and how the school itself becomes the source of what our future will be like.

But creating a work in close connection with children is also an opportunity to work on changes in a more focused, conscious and visible way. Because when children and young people are the creators of the art work their voices become part of it. Also, in a literal sense. It seemed essential to me that we were not striving for some imagined artistic perfection in their voices. It is more important that the voices are different and that they reflect their particular experiences and personalities. It gives the right dose of authenticity and documentality that I need in my works.

WHERE TO START THE CHANGE?

Klāvs Mellis is one of the founders of the non-profit, non-governmental theatre troupe KVADRIFRONS, a group of like-minded young artists who are known for critically exploring the relations that govern society and reacting to current processes, all done with a healthy dose of humor, irony and controversy. They premiered a piece named *Passive Tense* in 2020, the year when the new competence-based education system was implemented in Latvian schools to share their vision on realistic and unrealistic reforms and the path they take before getting accepted by the lukewarm local society.



Klāvs Mellis

What is your audience and what type of performances do you focus on?

Theoretically, like most independent theatre troupes we seem to have young hipster audiences, but when you look at the audience that is sitting in the hall you see very different people. There are also the visitors of our grandparents' age – they keep on coming back and writing good reviews about us. And also, for the shows – we always think we are making something different from the previous works, but they say “a typical show by KVADRIFRONS”. I believe that our artists have recognizable handwriting, not the company. And our spectrum is really wide – from classical drama to experimental theatre.

But what does an artist have to be to belong to KAVADRIFRONS?

I think we share similar tastes and human values, and these are people with whom it is easy to work with. Our work is basically quite excruciating and it takes up a very large part of our lives. Our colleagues are the people we meet most often, so these need to be people you want to meet with. All of our team members are great artists, but if I had to choose between working with a great artist or a great person, I would definitely choose a cool person. But that doesn't stop everyone from being very talented.

Where did the idea of *Passive Tense* come from?

One of the reasons was that we had to move out of the Circus premises because they started to renovate the building. And we were moving to the former Faculty of Physics, Mathematics, and Optometry. Therefore, we thought we should pay some tribute to the new place, and as the show was related to the Latvian education system... at least to some extent, although its deeper meaning is about something else. I know that the pandemic became the top priority last year, but it was also the time when modern competence-based education was implemented in all schools in Latvia. Even though in practice it is sometimes not very noticeable and depends very much on every teacher, in theory the Latvian education system has completely changed last year. And we thought that we need to make work about it – how the system is changing, how hard it is to change anything.

Do you feel personally connected to this subject or do you know much about it?

We wrote the text together with Ance Strazda, whose mother is a professor. My grandmother is a teacher. We are kind of connected to the bubble, but... This seems like a logical question – how much do we understand about it? We tried to get familiar with this subject, read all the materials for *School 2030*, watched many recordings of university constitutional meetings, we were really interested in it... But do I understand it? No, I don't understand it at all. And that's what the show is about. That it is impossible to understand the system. And it applies to all systems – no matter how hard you try to understand them, it's impossible. They go their own way like an oiled gear. For example, we are all trying to

understand tax reform, and no one understands it. In this show, we are only hiding behind the theme of education. The aim is to speak about the reforms in general and the difficult path that any fundamental change has to take before its practical implementation.

Did you discover anything new or unexpected during this process?

The creative process coincided with the time when we moved, and to some extent we are a small system ourselves... We have a supposedly horizontal hierarchy, but anyway it's a hierarchy. And, in parallel, with the creative work we also experienced the practical difficulties of relocation. There was something like a change of system in our micro world or the transformation from one physical state to another. The premiere took place under insane conditions, the creative process was going in parallel with the adaptation of the new space to the theatre conditions, these were like two racing horses competing with each other. Although it is not directly reflected in the show, these topics are intertwined, since we as a small organization are still trying to understand our goals and ambitions.

What does the phrase "passive tense" mean in this show? In Latvian it also has the connotation "suffering tense" ...

The "passive tense" has several meanings in the context of the show. It is the structure of language that states that something has been done but the doer is unknown. In the show, it is one character that never appears on the stage, but they talk about her in the four different meetings. Actually, these are four different characters with the same name... But in a more general context, it is about this continuous activity, which creates the illusion that something is happening. The actors keep on talking around topics and never tackle the issue, they just talk and talk and that's not going anywhere and nothing fundamentally changes... these little people, nobody can really do anything. Not that there would be some puppet master who controls them from the outside. The people themselves are entangled with each other and cannot get anywhere, and this is where the suffering comes from. Like the samsara wheel, which also appears in the show.

No, I don't understand it at all. And that's what the show is about. That it is impossible to understand the system. And it applies to all systems – no matter how hard you try to understand them, it's impossible

Is it a critique of the current way of making decisions in our country?

This is not quite a critique. My aim is not to criticize anything or to stand up for some socio-political subject... You have to be really convinced about something to do so. It is a critique in a slightly more irrational, metaphysical sense, maybe an intimate self-criticism. In any case, this is not a direct reproach to someone outside of me. The show is supposed to be very funny, there are a lot of jokes, but it is also very depressing. There was one spectator who said after the premiere that there was no consolation in the show. To which the other has answered – you don't always need one. Well, there is no consolation, there is fatal despair in it... But it is not meant to be aggressive, it is more about reconciliation. It's not a criticism of the system, even if it needs to be done, and there are people who can do it... I can't step back from myself enough to focus on someone else. Unfortunately, I can't.

ON THE ART OF PITCH

The Latvian Theatre Showcase 2021 includes a new section – the pitching sessions that give an opportunity for nine groups of artists to present their works or performances, upcoming or created during the last few years. To ensure that participants are equally well prepared to present the idea in a 15-minute pitch format, the artists participate in a pitching preparation workshop led by Swedish producer Magnus Nordberg and NTIL Artistic Director Bek Berger.



Bek Berger, director of New Theatre Institute of Latvia

Pitching sessions are a new part of the Latvian theatre showcase. Why did you decide to introduce them?

These sessions allow a different group of artists to present their work, that is already made, or works that have not yet had a premiere. These are works that may be installation based and require a lot of lead time or community engaged practice, that requires a very different scale of production. We have works that are very early in conception, works that are halfway through conception, and works that are ready to tour.

Knowing that Pitching is not such common practice within the Latvian performing arts community, this year we're also offering a series of mentoring sessions with Magnus Norberg, who is a leading agent and producer, based in Stockholm. He is going to be working with the nine selected artists or artists groups to perfect the idea of the pitch, which will then lead towards each of the artists producing a short video. The video pitches will be followed by a short Q&A, so that the audience can more deeply engage with the works and the artist's practice.

What is a good pitch and bad pitch?

Ultimately the best kind of pitching gives a presenter the tools to imagine the work in their context. Those tools could be talking in great detail about your research practice or communicating the audience's experience of your performance. They can be talking very specifically about where you're placing this show, where it works best – in the courtyard or in a black box theatre with an audience capacity of 300. I think the best pitches are really human, and really provide this point of connection.

The worst kind of pitches are the ones that don't say anything, that are too mysterious. You don't instantly understand what the work is or what the artist wants to say. And that's where I think, some artists can get really tripped up to try and make this abstract performance. Actually, pitching is entirely the opposite. Abstract is the enemy of pitching, an enemy of really talking about your ideas.

What pitching allows is for people that maybe have different contexts to the work that you need to get an insight into your practice, and then potentially champion your work to other people. So, you never know who is actually going to be the most influential person to hear about your work or witness your work or co-work.

How was your first experience mentoring Latvian artists?

The possibility that this covid crisis has opened up is that we have a workshop leader based in Stockholm connecting with all of us in Latvia. The first workshop was really an introduction to the possibilities of pitching. We were watching some good video pitches and some not so good ones, and giving feedback on them. Seeing the really good ones you are like "I want to see the show. I want to see how it ends."

We are very excited to have a super diverse group of artists and artist groups presenting in the pitching sessions, and to see what strategies they will take, I'm certain that the nine will be very different video pitches. We will hold those video pitches on our digital platform live.theatre.lv so they can be shared, wide and very broadly as well.

Pitch Programme

Nov 3, 11:00 (CET 10:00) - Pitching Session 1

A Voice from the Bel Etage, Laukku

Physical Evidence Museum, Jana Jacuka, Laura Stašāne

The Frankenstein Complex, Valters Silis, Kārlis Krūmiņš

Tanabata or the Tale of Two Stars, Drawing Theatre

A Midsummer Night's Dream, Henrijs Arājs

Nov 4, 11:00 (CET 10:00) - Pitching Session 2

End of the World and Other Nonsense, Krista Burāne

LABRYS+, IevaKrish

Strange People Stand Very Strangely, Association Sansuši

FEMINA, LDM5

THE SAMOVAR CIRCLES

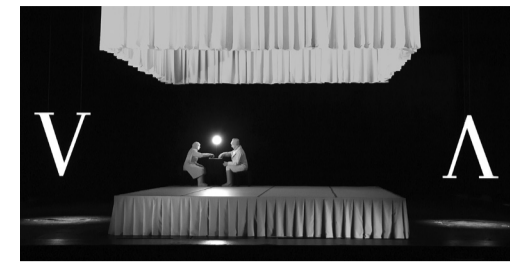


SAMOVAR CIRCLES is a short term network wishing to create a collective catalyst and boiler of ideas on how to tackle the new challenges and opportunities for the performing arts in post Covid times. It aims to become an empathy driven think-tank from which inspiration can ripple into new working models for tomorrow. They invite artists and presenters in the Nordic and Baltic contemporary circus and performing arts scene to a series of meetings, workshops and seminars on the following questions: What is the future of international collaboration? How do we develop the work for diversity? How do we support the new generation of artists?

SAMOVAR CIRCLES is initiated and partnered by Subtopia (Sweden), CircusInfo Finland (Finland), Performing Arts Hub (Norway), Teatronas (Lithuania), the Latvian New Theater Institute (Latvia) and Wildtopia (Denmark) with the objective to support artists and presenters across the field to keep going, strengthen relationships and find out together how to build new support structures for the future. These artists collaborated for the first time in the context of *Subcase Cyber* in 2021, then discovering their differences being profoundly valuable. The encounters offered vital inspiration and provocation in a time when covid was stripping them of live interaction with Nordic and Baltic peers, artists and audiences. Based on their joint engagement in what the new reality will look like for contemporary performing arts in the region, they wish to deepen the conversations in a collective engagement with the field.

Monday, November 1Whole day *Very Good Minutes*

A dance performance by two couples, movement artists Elina Gediņa and Rūdolfs Gediņš who worked together with visual artists Krista and Reinis Dzudzilo, is intended as a bodily conversation between a woman and a man. Referring to Walter Benjamin's *Moscow Diary*, the performance explores the relationship between dance and visual art.

Elina Gediņa, Rūdolfs Gediņš,
Krista Dzudzilo, Reinis Dzudzilo**Tuesday, November 2**10:30
CET 09:30 Morning Coffe Toast11:00
CET 10:00 Bonfire (Part of Samovar Circles network)Whole day *Strangers on a Train*

Trains and long travels inspire open conversations even among strangers. One of them suggests getting rid of "disturbing" family members...The play staged in the year of the hundredth anniversary of American crime writer Patricia Highsmith, regards writing as the only way to survive.

Vladislav Nastavshev

Whole day *Demon*

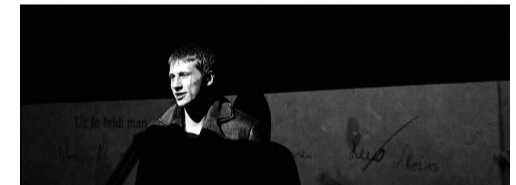
Russian poet Mikhail Lermontov worked on the poem *Demon* throughout all his short life. It is a story about a fallen angel in hatred and loneliness until he spies the beautiful Tamara. The performance created in close collaboration with jazz trio Auziņš-Čudars-Arutyunyan is looking for an answer to the question "What is a demon?" here and today.

Viesturs Meikšāns

**Wednesday, November 3**11:00
CET 10:00 Pitching Session 113:00
CET 12:00 Online TALK: Sustainable Cooperation ModelsCancelled
due to Covid
restrictions*Conclave*

Conclave (Konklāvs) is a detective story based on Klāvs Kristaps Košins personal experience. The performance talks about addictions in a broad sense. The performance is the director's diploma work, graduating from the Latvian Academy of Culture.

Klāvs Kristaps Košins

Whole day *The Boy Who Saw
in the Dark*

The play by Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce is a coming-of-age story about a sighted boy named Jēkabs who was born to blind parents and his gradual separation from the family. Using an elaborate sound design the audience is brought to the world where the main sensory organ is hearing. The play was recognized as the best play in Latvian Theatre Award *Spēlmaņu nakts 2020*.

Valters Silis

Whole day Opera film *Baņuta*

An international project that melds first Latvian opera, musical performances, the conditionality of the performing arts and contemporary performativity. The trauma and violence of war and personal relationships is an important leitmotif – Baņuta takes part in partisan battles, bringing with her the collective experience of the women who have suffered through the wars in 20th century Eastern Europe.

Hauen und Stechen,
Story Hub, SansusiWhole day Academic production
Passive Tense

The parents of a kindergartner, a primary school teacher, a member of a secondary school's student council and the members of an organ of a university's Constitutional Assembly have four excruciating meetings. *Passive Tense* is a play about professional ecstasy which leads to academic impotence. It is about realistic and unrealistic reforms and how slow and leisurely yesterday becomes tomorrow.

KVADRIFRONS



Thursday, November 4

11:00
CET 10:00 Pitching Session 2


13:00
CET 12:00 TALK: Context and Change Making

Whole day	<i>Elaeis Guineensis</i>	<i>Elaeis guineensis</i> is the Latin name for a species of palm commonly known for producing palm oil. It is a visually enjoyable dance performance that subtly plays with the theme of balance and trust and stands out with the quality of movements, atmospheric environment and nuanced live music design.	Ramona Levane	
Whole day	<i>In Horizon</i>	The piece by choreographer Gundega Rēdere is an insight into the relentless, active and fluid process of how giving a part of one's weight to another and taking part of one's partner's weight creates a delicate shared balance. It is about trust and balance while being off-balance.	Gundega Rēdere	
Whole day	<i>Routine of Fear</i>	How safe does a young woman feel as she is growing up? How can the safest space become the most dangerous? The solo piece by choreographer Jana Jacuka is a personal story of a young woman about the world of the "weaker sex".	Jana Jacuka	
Whole day	<i>Run</i>	A story of the generation of 20-somethings who keep running after the meaning of life. The contemporary adaptation of Alexander Vampilov's <i>Duck Hunting</i> combines elements from two worlds – film and theatre. Herewith it tasks the eight actors not only with acting but also with doing the camera work, becoming the eyes of the viewer, opening up different points of view at the sad and funny events from the main protagonist's life.	EsArte	
Whole day	<i>The Lost Songs</i>	<i>The Lost Songs</i> are songs of the world and insecurity, dreams and reality, the small and the infinite, and the ever so important ability to retain the joy of life. Using the body, the voice and rhythm as the main means of expression, the creative team invites the audience to share a dream about tomorrow.	Agate Bankava, Artūrs Čukurs and Andrejs Jarovojš	



Friday, November 5

11:00
CET 10:00 TALK: Contemporary Latvian theatre: trends and challenges noticed from aside

14:00
CET 13:00 WEBINAR: Alternative Touring Models: Samara Editions with Lisa Gilardino (Part of Samovar Circles network)

18:00 19:00 20:00 CET 17:00 18:00 19:00	<i>Exercises of (Be)longing</i>	One-on-one telephone performance happening live. It starts at a set time when the audience member calls a stranger, opens an envelope containing photographs, and surrenders to the story of the anonymous person. Based on real life stories about the process of finding a way to be with people around them.	Jānis Balodis, Katrina Dūka, Barbara Lehtna, Kristina Hudenko	
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Every day of the showcase

Whole day	<i>Never-disappearing Pārdaugavas</i>	The audio performance portrays human existentialism and toiled relations in an age when social networks did not exist, but in completely different threads. One such thread leads the narrator's voice through the labyrinth of underground music of Pārdaugava in Riga.	The Nebula DJV	
Whole day	<i>Looks Like You're Going to Die</i>	An intimate encounter that reflects on the complexity and beauty of everyday living and the fragility of creation. An audio track takes the listener on a wandering trip through the mind, memories, and different European cities.	Kate Krolle, Valters Silis	

About NTIL

New Theatre Institute of Latvia (NTIL) is a project based organisation working in the field of contemporary performing arts. Since 1995 NTIL has been organizing the International Festival of Contemporary Theatre Homo Novus, which is the largest performing arts platform in Latvia. NTIL also produces and presents projects and long term collaboration programmes together with local and international partners, strongly believing in the necessity to explore the contemporary performing arts field together with artists and audiences.

About *LiVe*

With performances, demos and production pitches, *LiVe* is showcasing the finest contemporary work from Latvia. The showcase encompasses the full range of performing arts, including dance and theatre, also delivered in exciting yet difficult-to-define combinations. *LiVe* invites international professionals to engage with digital presentations, performances, pitches, talks and a selection of works from Riga theatres.

Due to the current epidemiological situation the 2021 Latvian Theatre Showcase takes place only online on the *LiVe* digital platform that serves also as a digital catalog for guests or any interested parties who want to get information about particular performances and their technical requirements for touring. *LiVe* aims to acquaint foreign partners with contemporary Latvian performing arts works, artists and the specifics of the local theatre industry in order to promote more fruitful international cooperation and more diverse development of Latvian performing arts scene.

During the showcase which takes place from November 2 to 5, the digital platform *LiVe* also acts as a centre of the event where the presenters can watch the performances, follow the daily programme and participate in the conversations and discussions.

The 2021 *LiVe*: Latvian Theatre Showcase is organized by the New Theatre Institute of Latvia (NTIL) in cooperation with the Latvian Theatre Labour Association (LTDS), the Latvian branch of the International Association of Theatre Critics (AICT/IACT) and Latvian theatres, companies and individual artists.

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