

CHOREOGRAPHER IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE: THE CASE OF LATVIA

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Abstract

As the paradigm of dramatic theatre has changed and the genre of contemporary dance has evolved, a new approach to theatrical choreography has emerged. In Latvia, a new generation of contemporary dance choreographers has been active for two decades. They have significantly influenced both the aesthetics of their productions and developed the degree of the participation and co-responsibility in dramatic actors.

By working together with contemporary dance choreographers, some actors and directors have changed their attitudes toward their body, its role, and the meaning of their movements. There is a growing awareness of how much time, effort, and precision would be required for smart and valuable choreography. This is a new experience and an opportunity for dramatic theatre. To delve deeper, Ben Spatz, researcher and theorist of embodied practice, through his research encourages artists to focus on the process of exploring the body rather than on endlessly developing technical virtuosity.

While the director is still primarily responsible for the staging, the work of the rest of the creative team is often of equal importance. According to the postdramatic theatre theory of scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann and to the performing arts scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte, this development is a general tendency in contemporary theatre – the focus is set on living, immediate relationship between theatre and audience, and in this contemporary art discourse the choreographer plays a very important role.

Keywords: *Olga Žitlūhina, contemporary theatre, contemporary dance.*

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Theatre has changed in the 21st century, and the role of a choreographer¹ in theatre has changed, too. We can see choreographers working across the entire spectrum – from just illustrating the historical period represented, to staging the entire performance. Contemporary theatre is defined as devised theatre, and in most cases, choreography plays an important role in its creative processes. The aim of this study is to identify the main directions of contemporary dance choreographers' activity, identifying different forms of collaboration that can be observed in the theatre of Latvia.

Applying the comparative historical research method, the author of this study has sought to find out the role that performative art processes played in the interwar period and in the Soviet years of the previous century in relation to the choreographer's function in staging. The representations of a choreographer as a member of the creative team, viewed historically, enable us to trace the current developments as part of an ongoing process of boundary expansion and creative pursuits.

Aiming to identify the various current forms of collaboration (between directors, choreographers and performers) in the production of performances, the qualitative research strategy has been applied: theatre productions in which choreographers also participated (participant observation) have been analysed, performers interviewed (partly structured interviews), interviews and media reviews studied (qualitative content analysis).

An overview of the historical development of a choreographer's function in the theatre of Latvia

When professional theatre was still developing in Latvia – in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – the choreographer's duties were performed by the director. Dances and games (which were included in the staging) usually played the role of interludes. It was a common practice to invite professional ballet artists to dance and create choreographies as only they qualified as skilled professionals.

During the interwar period, the most advanced research in the field of stage movement and body expression took place in Daile Theatre. Eduards Smiļģis as its artistic director intended to create contemporary ways of theatrical expression and thus needed a team of distinguished professionals. Almost immediately after having founded his theatre in 1920, he invited to his team Felicita Ertnerē, who had studied rhythmplastics in St. Petersburg, Russia, completed rhythmic gymnastics and plastic arts studies with Sophie Auer (Isadora Duncan's student), and learned the principles

¹ The term "choreographer" within this study refers to the person who works with the performer's body in time and space to create a movement score (in theatre, circus, musical, dance performance, etc.).

developed by Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and François Delsarte. Ertneere applied these practices to regular actor training, and also participated in Smiļģis' productions as an assistant director (then referred to as a movement consultant). Other modern dance adaptors of the pre-war period (Beatrise Vīgnere, Anna Ašmane) were also regularly invited to work on productions in Latvian theatres.

During the Soviet occupation period, modernist tendencies in arts were qualified as unwelcome formalism and thus were replaced by the so-called psychological realism. Consequently, theatrical practices were forced to follow a dogmatic interpretation of Stanislavsky's system, while modernist dance practices were stuck in stagnation. For almost fifty years after the World War II, the stages of Latvia were dominated by traditional theatre, which ensured that a director would stage dramatic plays or adaptations of prose works. This was usually done within the framework of psychological realism, the only legitimate form of theatre in Soviet culture. If a choreographer was invited to join the creative team, it was a ballet choreographer whose task was to stage the dances of the portrayed time period.

However, the performance art researcher Laine Kristberga concludes: *"The political regime was even stimulating the creativity of artists, since they had to find innovative artistic strategies to be able to coexist along the official culture. Undeniably, these strategies were partly subjected to the mechanism of fear (and survival) imposed by the totalitarian regime and, thus, are historically, socially and politically specific. Yet, paradoxically, it also shows that the regime was unable to silence the creative expression, individualism and initiative"* [Kristberga 2021: 341]. In the 1960s and 1970s a new trend surfaced – represented by Riga Pantomime Ensemble with Roberts Ligers and by Ansis Rūtentāls Movement Theatre. Roberts Ligers and Ansis Rūtentāls are regarded as pioneers in the development of contemporary dance practices in Latvia. Their creative activity has left a multi-layered impact. For example, Alvis Hermanis – one of Latvia's most internationally renowned directors – refers to Roberts Ligers as his first theatre teacher.

The 1950s and 1960s marked the pantomime boom in Europe, while the 1970s and 1980s bred a powerful movement of performance art that still focused a lot on physical expression. This artistic quest, notable for its connection with the political protest trends of the time, could be traced not only in the Western world, but also in the Soviet bloc countries. Thus, to quote the dance researcher Sabine Sörgel, the claim for freedom, solidarity and democratic society was asserted: *"It is by creatively affirming the felt quality of life that the dancer expresses freedom as the outward transcendence of self and individuality – the basic condition for freedom and solidarity in a democratic society"* [Sörgel 2015: 4].

Pantomime and movement theatre not only invited performers to express the world non-verbally but also provided a different type of body awareness. For

example, Roberts Ligers was convinced that actors themselves needed to add a personal touch to their movements. Modris Tenisons, Ligers' student, who worked as a mime, a choreographer and a stage designer, (he was also the founder and director of the Professional *Pantomime Theatre* in Kaunas, 1966–1972), emphasized the necessity for pantomime actors to take full control of their bodies, so that they could work as a unified team. Ansis Rūtentāls always strived for discovering the uniqueness of the body of his performers, allowing them freedom of expression. These examples match general quests in the field of contemporary dance. Both pantomime and movement theatre “*have parallels with the development of performance art and the search for a new theatre language in the Western world*” [Kreicberga, Tišheizere, Ulberte 2022: 90].

Alongside avant-garde art, as another protest form characteristic to popular culture, rock music shall be mentioned as well. Hans-Thies Lehmann, with Elvis Presley and “The Beatles” in mind, has claimed that: “*For the first time in the history of the world, music is directed at youth. It is the victory march of youth culture*” [Lehmann 2006: 54]. During the Soviet period – especially in the early 1980s – rock music also served as a form of protest against the regime. Rock music and popular culture influence can be observed in the musicals staged in the Riga Operetta Theatre, as well as in variety show programs with choreography created by Janīna Pankrate. At that time, ballet masters from all over the Soviet Union came to Riga to learn from her. Operetta and even more variety show combined classical dance (all performers had a ballet background) and popular pop music. The principle of combining classical dance fundamentals with current popular culture music is still continued in different dance studios, where children and young people adapt a wide range of dance styles and movements (from jazz to street dance). Contemporary dance in Latvia, on the other hand, has been developing along a more individualised path and is strongly oriented towards research-based art, often breaking down the hierarchical relationship between choreographer and performers, who jointly and equally turn into seekers, performers or creators.

In parallel, theatre has also changed, and in the post-Soviet space in the 1990s the changes were particularly dynamic. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the theatre “*began to explore the new possibilities in a more sensible way (..) More often than before, theatre artists travelled abroad and were finally free to enjoy the newfound freedom of repertoire and the new aesthetic trends from Europe and beyond. Directors broke the restrictions and began to experiment with Western forms and methods in theatre, combining them with their own perception of dramatic material and aesthetic experience*” [Zeltiņa 2012: 26]. Along with the overall paradigm shift in theatre, the role and function of the choreographer in theatre was gradually changed.

Nowadays young actors, directors and choreographers study alongside each other at the Latvian Academy of Culture, get to know each other and learn to create

artistic events together. This ability to collaborate and trust each other comes in handy later on when they meet in professional teams, creating productions in both state theatres and independent theatre projects.

Performer's movement score in performance: from dynamic illustration to transferring a message in movement language

As already hinted, first postmodern performances in Latvia emerged only after the fall of the Iron Curtain, to specify, in the late 1990s. One of the “angry young directors” generation was Dž. Dž. Džilindžers. When he staged his first production on the main stage of Daile Theatre, Džilindžers collaborated with Olga Žitluhina dance company. Olga Žitluhina had just introduced contemporary dance to Latvia and Džilindžers found it fascinating, but in this first co-production – the rock opera “Fausts. Deus ex Machina” – the dance movements of the girls from Žitluhina’s dance company were, however, added only as exotic embellishments and did not merge with the actors’ performance (Figure 1), although they supported the aesthetics of postmodern theatre.

Over time, the importance of a choreographer in contemporary theatre kept increasing. In 1999, on the initiative of Olga Žitluhina, the Latvian Academy of



Figure 1. “Fausts. Deus ex Machina”, directed by Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, 1999, Daile Theatre (photo: Jānis Deinats).

Culture launched a programme for contemporary dance arts; since then, almost 100 young artists have already graduated. Many of them work regularly as choreographers at the theatre. They often become assistant directors, helping to develop mise-en-scene and the relationships among the characters. The most characteristic example to representing this trend is choreographer Inga Krasovska, who after graduating from the Latvian Academy of Culture was for many years a member of the Daile Theatre creative team, in the status of an assistant to the aforementioned director Dž. Dž. Džilindžers. She assisted the director in his work, composed dance or movement phrases, worked in movement classes with actors individually and in groups for specific productions, and eventually created original choreographies for several musical productions and independently created a dance performance with actors (not only working in the Daile Theatre).

As a result of a series of fortunate coincidences in 2021, Elīna Gediņa and Rūdolfs Gediņš (together with visual artists Krista Dzudzilo and Reinis Dzudzilo) assembled a performance for Daile Theatre's main stage, "Very Good Minutes", as a dialogue between the art of movement and the visual arts. Both choreographers are graduates of the Latvian Academy of Culture and work in a wide spectrum – they can be performers in other colleagues' works or authors of original works; they are able to adapt to the specifics of the show, but they can also slowly and purposefully elaborate their own original creation, such as "Very Good Minutes". However, regarding dramatic theatre, the most outstanding work by Elīna Gediņa is associated with productions created in collaboration with the director Viesturs Kairišs. The director staged five great classic works in different Latvian theatres over a three-year period – "Fire and Night" by Rainis, "Peer Gynt" by Henrik Ibsen, "Salome" by Oscar Wilde, "King Lear" by William Shakespeare, and "Balladyna" by Juliusz Słowacki. In these impressive productions on the main stage, Elīna Gediņa worked with the director both to illustrate the historical characteristics of the productions and also to develop specific movement scores for individual characters. For example, in the performance "Peer Gynt" (Latvian National Theatre, 2016), the plastic movement of the main performer Uldis Anže is an important key to Peer Gynt character played by him. At the beginning of the play, when Peer Gynt tells his mother about a deer he has seen, his own stature also resembles a young and powerful animal, from whose exterior a tremendous strength breaks out. Theatre scholar Edīte Tišheizere writes: "*Uldis Anže plays the degradation of the hero's personality largely through plastic movement, body language is as important in this role as Ibsen's text*" [Tišheizere 2018]. The choreographer has worked with the actor individually, searching precisely for his own authentic movement, suggesting a plastic movement model that, without words, directly correlates with Peer Gynt's path of self-discovery.

In the summer of 2022, Elmārs Seņkova became the artistic director of the Latvian National Theatre, and his management team included, among others, the choreographer Elīna Gediņa. This is not a common practice in Latvian theatre, but Elmārs Seņkova is obviously very aware of the needs and specifics of contemporary theatre, as well as of the role of a choreographer in the process of creating large-scale productions. In 2018, Elmārs Seņkova directed a large-scale production of “Blow, the Wind!” by Rainis, in which, together with the ensemble of actors, the living scenography was created by around 150 members of folk-dance groups under the direction of the choreographer Jānis Purviņš. The contemporary dance choreographer Agate Bankava worked directly with the ensemble, helping the actors to enlive their characters’ fates against the backdrop of a huge platform (almost the entire stage was filled by a platform hosting 150 dancers, who changed their position as the *mise-en-scene* changed).

Besides, Agate Bankava has created two dance performances with dramatic theatre actors at the Latvian National Theatre, thus gradually accustoming both the artists and the audience to new forms of theatrical expression, where actors and dancers perform together (Figure 2). Thus, in the recent period the Latvian National Theatre has made the most interesting progress in the field of stage choreography.



Figure 2. “Visas manas vājības ir tavas lūpas”, choreographed by Agate Bankava, Rūdolfs Gediņš, Dmitrijs Gaitjukevičs, 2018, Latvian National Theatre (photo: Kristaps Kalns).

There are also interdisciplinary projects and auteur theatre performances by choreographers on the stages of independent theatres. It is understandable that choreographers want to express themselves creatively with their own ideas from time to time, but it is usually easier to get funding for small-scale projects. Nevertheless, these events, and even more so the preparatory process, are also important experiences. It offers experimental freedom and further exploration of the possibilities of the performers' body. It has been used by all the artists who regularly work as choreographers in dramatic theatre – Elīna Gedīņa, Agate Bankava, Jana Jacuka, Liene Grava.

Two productions by Sergei Zemlyansky (guest choreographer from Russia) at Liepāja Theatre (performances without words – “Indulis and Ārija”, 2014; “Marriage”, 2017) have received special recognition among theatre critics. This is also an important experience for dramatic theatre actors, although less related to the basic principle of contemporary dance – to explore movement and search for the expression of the body. Zemlyansky essentially creates the movement score as an illustration of the playwright's text and demands a great input of energy and strength in order for the choreographer's vision of stage movement to be executed. For the spectator, it is also a breath-taking experience at times, but technically and conceptually it is similar to a show in which performers compete in the virtuosity of different abilities.

As Ben Spatz has pointed out in his study “What a Body Can Do”, in acting it is impossible to do anything with technique alone, and the work of a truly creative performer should be connected with physical culture and with cultural identity. Ben Spatz has studied both the Stanislavsky system, which is so overused at the dramatic theatre, and the Jerzy Grotowski method, and he has concluded that according to both methods the emphasis is on the working process. At the same time, the body and movement embody different ideas, thoughts, feelings, stories. So everything that shapes the performer's personality also influences their movement. It shall be concluded that actors have to be aware of their bodies and develop their personalities, and only then we can talk about a real contemporary art process or event.

Contemporary Dance in the Context of Post-Dramatic Theatre

As it has already been mentioned, the dramatic theatre paradigm in Latvia has slowly changed after the fall of the Iron Curtain. According to the post-dramatic theory by the German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann, this shift is related to an emerging practice of focusing on a live immediate relationship between the performance and the spectator. While the former theatre paradigm focused primarily on dramatic text and its interpretation (when working on a production, the first rehearsals are often dedicated to a full read-through of the script and its analysis), in

contemporary theatre text is often regarded as just one of the structural elements of the whole theatrical production, – besides scenography, music, light design or video projection. In this interdisciplinary art space, a choreographer plays an important role in close collaboration with the performers, focusing on their individual features and being perceived as a co-creator of the final artwork.

Multidisciplinarity encourages choreographers to develop their professional skills and this process is sustained by the opportunity to receive professional training. Olga Žitluhina – the head of the contemporary dance programme at the Latvian Academy of Culture – has described contemporary dance studies as the following: “*It is not about what and if we teach anything, but it is about giving them a chance to understand something. We are giving them opportunities to get the maximum information from the world. We feed them with all sorts of teachers, possible and impossible techniques, and methods, above all, retaining the idea, that there is no such thing as right and wrong. There are only options*” [Jonīte 2016]. As a result, young choreographers are ready to embrace a wide diversity of cooperation forms and working conditions.

What matters most is that in co-operation with contemporary dance choreographers, some actors and directors have changed their attitude towards the role of the body and the movement on the stage. There is a growing awareness of the necessity to invest time, effort and precision in meaningful and sophisticated choreography. Furthermore, there is no generation gap, as young choreographers and older generation stage directors can easily collaborate as well. For example, the choreographer Guntis Spridzāns, whose background is hip-hop culture, has successfully introduced hip-hop to the opera “Carmen” (directed by Marie-Eve Signeyrole from France). Agnese Vanaga has introduced contemporary circus to several Latvian National Theatre productions (directed by Dita Lūriņa and Ināra Slucka). The young choreographer Jana Jacuka has designed movements for puppets and actors in various Latvian theatres (Figure 3).

Choreographers are regarded as an essential part of the productions by Viesturs Kairiņš (the artistic director of Daile Theatre since 2020) to the extent that they are referred to as co-authors even on the advertising posters, for instance, the one of “Peer Gynt” where the choreographer is aligned with the playwright, composer, director, and stage designers (Latvian National Theatre, 2016). Previously, when a classic play was staged, we were used to seeing only the name of playwright on advertising posters, and perhaps the director of the production, but that’s it.

The outstanding German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte reminded us in her book “The Transformative Power of Performance” that the actor is not just a medium in space, as the German theatre historian Max Hermann wrote in 1930, and “*foregrounded the specific materiality of bodies and space, which sets in motion*



Figure 3. “Mumu”, directed by Viesturs Kairiņš, 2018, Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre (photo: Inese Kalniņa).

the performance in the first place” [Fischer-Lichte 2008: 34]. Both Hermann and the renowned German director Max Reinhardt have written and done much to emphasize that theatre is “based on a fleeting and dynamic process and not an artefact” [Fischer-Lichte 2008: 35]. And where there is an actor and his or her body, the specific knowledge, experience and skills of the choreographers are also needed.

Ina Balode is optimistic about the convergence of theatre and contemporary dance: “*The continuous work of bringing contemporary choreography to the theatre has the potential to close the gap between the understanding of choreography in the Latvian theatre and dance scene. And this is not to help the “poor” field of dance, but to give audiences the opportunity to experience a broader spectrum of what contemporary theatre is and what it can do to go beyond verbal language*” [Balode 2020: 111]. The theatre choreographers interviewed in Balode’s research confirm that despite the positive changes in the field of contemporary art, choreographers are still expected to “set up dances” not only by the majority of the audience, but also by performing art professionals (the “set up dances” here are to be interpreted as poetic action or illustration of music with a very clear function).

Another important aspect should be noted regarding the role of contemporary dance in the context of the theatre in Latvia. On the one hand, contemporary dance artists regularly collaborate with theatre. On the other hand, professional dance

and theatre communities have gone distinct ways when it comes to evaluating their productions. Until 2017, contemporary dance performances were judged by the Theatre Awards jury, but since summer 2017, the dance community has had its own Dance Awards. Every two years, the jury, composed of various dance professionals, evaluates all events in ballet, performing folk dance, contemporary dance and street/show dance. The theatre jury evaluates only the work of choreographers in dramatic theatre productions once a year. Despite narrowing the scope of evaluation, it is often difficult to define genre boundaries and transitions and to distinguish between different competencies. For example, it is unclear who should evaluate a dance performance by a contemporary dance choreographer in the repertoire of the Latvian National Theatre and whether the theatre award jury can evaluate a dance performance staged by a director of dramatic theatre or whether it has the competence to evaluate a choreographer who uses the spoken word. The situation is even more complex for such contemporary art events where elements of visual art, choreography, and theatre are equally important. Here we must deal with the changeability, unpredictability, and openness to a variety of experiences of contemporary art.

Theatre directors work directly with contemporary dance choreographers, who act as intermediaries between the bodies of performers (actors, singers, dancers). Latvian dance critic, curator and performer Inta Balode has imaginatively and very precisely compared the relationship between a director and a choreographer in contemporary theatre to the collaboration between “*an architect and an engineer, or a designer and a sculptor. The choreographer is directly responsible for the idea in a figurative sense and literally translates the message into bodies of the performers. (..) The choreographer is in the role of a priest translating God’s message into the flesh*” [Balode 2020: 106]. In other words, the choreographer in theatre is often like an assistant director, who translates the conceptual ideas of the production into the plasticity and stage action of the actors. The choreographer focuses primarily on the individual characteristics of the performers and on the search for movement quality. A contemporary dance choreographer masters rhythm and space and has specific knowledge of a body’s capabilities in time and space. At the same time – “*the principles of a physical theater and contemporary dance-based thinking have an increasing impact on the process of theater creation*” [Kreicberga, Tišheizere, Ulberte 2022: 91].

Conclusion

The performers and their bodies are usually in the foreground of a theatrical performance, whenever or wherever it is staged, and whatever the narrative structure or creative aspirations of a director may be. This is true in most cases, even if we consider that performers sometimes work with puppets or other objects. A creative

and talented choreographer focuses primarily on the individual characteristics of performers and on the search for movement quality, and to an equal extent a contemporary dance choreographer masters rhythm and space because he/she has specific knowledge of body's capabilities in time and space.

Contemporary dance choreographers in Latvia contribute to the process of contemporary performing arts in different ways and in different capacities by participating in dramatic theatre productions. While Latvians are slow to trust new things, younger generations are becoming more open and willing to embrace new developments. Hopefully, we will see that the presence of contemporary dance in the theatre of Latvia helps our culture and art space to become even more colourful, innovative and versatile.

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