

## LATVIAN THEATRE IN TRANSITION. THE ROOTS IN THE 1990s

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the emergence and evolution of the so-called independent theatre scene in Latvia in the radically changing socio-political and institutional context of the 1990s. The analysis concerns the question why in Latvia the independent theatres did not become a significant alternative from the inherited institutional repertory theatre system until the second decade of the new century. Examples of the independent theatres *Kabata*, *Skatuve* and *Mūris* help to illustrate the general tendencies showing that a lack of a strong artistic vision and managerial strategy in difficult economic circumstances lead to the underdevelopment of a diversity of production models in performing arts in Latvia. In addition, after a short loss of direction, institutional theatres in the mid-90s started to attract nearly all artistically interesting new initiatives, especially if it already had proved itself within the independent scene. The New Riga Theatre and The Atelier of Unbearable Theatre characterize these processes, moreover indicating that the avant-garde directors of the time – Alvis Hermanis, Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, Viesturs Kairišs, Gatis Šmits and Regnārs Vaivars – were interested in a radical break with the past in terms of aesthetics of theatre, but they were not interested in politics. The comparison with the independent theatre scene in Estonia and Lithuania shows that the similar initial circumstances may lead to different outcomes.

**Keywords:** *Latvian theatre, 1990s, independent theatre, production models, avant-garde, New Riga Theatre, Alvis Hermanis, Pēteris Krilovs.*

This paper reflects part of my research about the Latvian theatre during the transition period of the late 80s and 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The aim is to reconsider the recent history of the Latvian theatre looking at how the radical socio-political changes of the late 1980s and 1990s affected the theatre both aesthetically and structurally and how deliberate or incidental artistic choices underpin the practice

and perception of Latvian theatre today. As British theatre researcher Mark Fortier has put it: “(..) *of course theatre happens in a larger context. Indeed, with its need for a public place, for physical resources, workers and an audience, theatre is more complexly and intimately intertwined with the outside world than many literary and other artistic activities. Moreover, changes in the world are bound to produce changes in theatrical production. Any well-rounded theory of the theatre, therefore, must take account of how theatre relates to the forces of the outside world*” [Fortier 2002: 102]. This paper will focus on the emergence and evolution of the so-called independent theatre scene in Latvia in the socio-political and institutional context of the time.

### The Context

At the beginning of the 1990s, within a short period, major political, economic, social and ideological changes took place in Latvia. Many Baltic theatre scholars remark that theatre lost its role and significance for a while, as well its audience because, as the Latvian theatre scholar Valda Čakare defined in 2007, “(..) *the ‘theatre of life’ had become more interesting and exciting than the performing arts*” [Johnson 2007: 15]. In his article of 1998, the Estonian theatre critic Jaak Rähesoo explains: “*Theatre as a public art (..) had to re–think its role: for years a channel for expressing (..) opposition to Soviet rule, it now had to obtain a new function*” [Rähesoo 1999: 71]. In her overview of the period 1990–2000 in Lithuanian theatre, the researcher Rasa Vasinauskaite notices the paradox that “*the transformations of the independent Lithuania have brought to the theatre more confusion instead of a variety of expression and freedom of speech*” [Vasinauskaite 2006: 527]. The introduction of a market economy turned theatre institutions into business enterprises and spectators into consumers. These processes were similar in all three Baltic countries.

In his remarkable book *Resetting the Stage*, theatre researcher Dragan Klaić precisely describes the context in former communist countries, where new independent initiatives started to appear around 1987–1989:

*“Repertory companies were practically the sole model of professional performing arts in the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe before 1989. (..) After the collapse of communism, the theatre system changed little but the subsidy flow was sharply reduced. The repertory theatres sought to work in the old manner, now happily free of censorship interference, and to survive with much less public funding, so increasingly they relied on extra money earned by subletting space and with more commercial elements in their offer (..). That this inefficient, oversized and by and large dysfunctional system of repertory companies has continued to stagger*

*along indicates the strong failure of political will in the new democracies to innovate their cultural policies and tackle the inherited performing arts system. Instead, they have accepted dispensing public subsidies, much reduced by inflation and budgetary and monetary reforms, to the regular recipients, on the basis of habit and routine or historical record, and without any re-assessment. Much of the public money available is inevitably wasted on moribund institutions instead of supporting new, promising initiatives and organisations” [Klaić 2012: 40–41].*

In Latvia, two government-run repertory theatres were closed down in the early 90s – the State Youth Theatre in 1992 and the Operetta Theatre in 1995. On the other hand, “(..) *at the beginning of the 90s Latvian theatre had to solve problems linked to issues of survival rather than to aesthetic discoveries. At the end of the 80s, the enthusiasm caused by political change encouraged the foundation of several theatres. In 1988 Daugavpils Theatre was restored by the decision of the Council of Ministers, and in Riga, after the dramatic closing of the Youth Theatre in 1992, the New Riga Theatre was founded at the same venue on Lāčplēša street 25” [Čakare 2007: 8]. Both newcomers – Daugavpils Theatre and the New Riga Theatre – played a very important role in the further development of Latvian theatre to the present day.*

Between 1988 and 1993 two groups of acting students were educated by the film and theatre director Pēteris Krilovs and the theatre director Anna Eižvertiņa, in collaboration with other teaching staff, for the purposes of Daugavpils Theatre<sup>1</sup>. As a result, two groups of professionally strong and devoted actors formed the Latvian ensemble of Daugavpils Theatre for a very short period, and then, in 1996, almost all of them left the theatre and followed the artistic director Pēteris Krilovs to Riga. This was an especially important *initiation period* for one of the key figures in theatre and film education in Latvia – Pēteris Krilovs. He also founded the International Festival of Contemporary Theatre *Homo Novus* with its first edition in 1995 in Daugavpils. Part of his students became the leading younger generation of actors during the 90s, joining the newly established New Riga Theatre (NRT), some of the repertory theatres and the independent scene.

NRT was established in 1992 by the decision of the Ministry of Culture after the *reorganisation*, de facto an elimination, of the famous Youth Theatre led by the theatre director Adolf Shapiro whose dismissal was caused by the internal conflict

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<sup>1</sup> Daugavpils is the second largest city in Latvia with a huge Russian population (almost 50% in 2019). It was a political decision to re-establish theatre there as a means of strengthening the national identity in Daugavpils and the Eastern part of Latvia during the Latvian National Awakening in the late 1980s. Previously, a professional theatre had existed in Daugavpils until 1965.

in the theatre.<sup>1</sup> Actually, this conflict was based on more general issues faced by almost all theatres in Latvia – firstly, the artistic crisis, and, secondly, the economic tension created by the need for a new production model in terms of financing. Between 1992–1997, NRT operated as a mixed model of a repertory theatre and a production house, becoming a significant platform for artistic experiments. However, this was not a deliberate choice of its artistic director Juris Rijnieks; rather, it was a desperate reaction to the chaos of the economic and social situation of the 90s [Kreicberga 2016]. Rijnieks invited Alvis Hermanis and Māra Ķimele as in-house directors to form the core artistic team of the new theatre. Hermanis was an actor who had just returned to Latvia after a couple of years spent in the United States and who wanted to start his theatre directing career. Ķimele was an established theatre director well known for her deep psychological studies of characters combined with an experimental approach in her performances. Between 1993 and 1997 Hermanis produced eight performances at NRT, thereby training himself as a self-taught practitioner by trying out different aesthetic approaches. In 1997, after four seasons of this experimental phase, the Ministry of Culture invited the young and promising theatre director Alvis Hermanis to run this theatre. He formed a new company and returned to the accustomed model of a state repertory theatre. This was the beginning of the nowadays internationally recognized New Riga Theatre.

### **Independent Scene as a Start-up Platform**

Meanwhile, Latvia's regained freedom encouraged the emergence of an independent theatre scene, which was expected to introduce alternative modes of production and new styles of work to Latvian theatre. However, the so-called independent theatres<sup>2</sup> did not become a significant alternative for the inherited institutional repertory theatre system until the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even 30 years after regaining independence, we can still observe the stark dominance of institutional repertory theatres in Latvia, while other production forms and structures develop comparatively slowly and inconsistently. Only towards the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century does Latvia finally face a crisis of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Youth Theatre was the most prominent Latvian theatre in the late 1970s and 1980s. However, already in the late 1980s when political change was in the air it faced an artistic and organisational crisis, deepened by the radical economic changes of the early 1990s. The main reason behind the decision of the Ministry of Culture to terminate the contract with Adolf Shapiro in 1992 was the internal conflict in the theatre – actors were complaining about the lack of an artistic and employment strategy on the part of the director and asked the Ministry of Culture to dismiss him.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of an independent theatre in this article is used to denote all theatres of any organisational form or aesthetic attempt that appear as private initiatives alongside the national or municipal theatre institutions.

institutional theatres, which are now starting to reconsider their production models. On the other hand, during the last decade, the independent theatre scene has become much more established and recognized in Latvia.

The roots of the current situation can be found in the transformation processes of the 90s. Here some examples may help to illustrate the general tendencies. One of the first independent theatres *Kabata* (“Pocket”) was founded in 1987 in a small cellar in the Old Town of Riga by a group of young theatre directors who could not find jobs in the existing state theatres. It was possible because due to Perestroika some alternative models of economic activity were allowed and introduced. For a few years it became a truly experimental zone, hosting performances not only directed by its founders, but also by some established theatre directors (for instance, Māra Ķimele, Oļģerts Kroders, and Fēlikss Deičs), Theatre Studio No. 8 (which would have developed as an alternative theatre had it continued), and the first performance staged in Latvia by the diasporic Latvian-Canadian Baņuta Rubess, among others. A great part of performances staged in *Kabata* during the first seasons were stylistic experiments confirming the regained artistic freedom of theatre-makers. In 1992 *Kabata* moved to another venue in the Old Town, mingling with a music club, and this already marked its artistic decline signaling an inevitable, and in some sense prophetic, commercialization trend.

*“Big theatres gradually started to recover from the confusion caused by the transition period and the audience interested in serious theatre returned to the high-quality performances on the small stages of these theatres. Kabata did not offer any contemporary approaches in style, acting or directing anymore (...), there was a lack of fresh ideas, creativity and experimentation. Obviously, all their energy was spent on fighting for existence”* [Akots 2007: 573].

Later theatre-makers associated with *Kabata* developed a children’s theatre, drawing its audience from a direct collaboration with schools. In 2001 another group of artists established the theatre club *Austrumu robeža* (“The Eastern Border”) focusing on commercial theatre forms – cabaret, comedy, stand-up.

In 1991 theatre director Anna Eižvertiņa and some of her like-minded peers established the independent theatre *Skatuve* (“The Stage”) in a former cinema located in a remote and rundown area of Riga. The main focus of this theatre was “to stage works of world literature and drama never brought to the Latvian theatre” [Akots 1997: 580] with the operating principle of gathering a new team for every single project. Notably, many great classical and contemporary playwrights were introduced to the Latvian audience for the first time. However, as Eižvertiņa’s

productions took a rather conventional approach and were carried out with very poor resources, the interest and number of audiences were very limited. Thanks to her position as an acting professor at the Latvian Academy of Culture since the mid-90s, *Skatuve* became a platform for the first performances of younger generations of theatre directors and actors. For instance, in 1995 Dž. Dž. Džilindžers made his first production here, called *Emma Bovary*. A year later, he became one of the founding members of the young theatre directors' alliance *Nepanesamā teātra artelis* ("Atelier of Unbearable Theatre"), but from 1997, he worked at the Daile state repertory theatre where he rose to the position of the artistic director in 2012–2019. Another important figure who started his professional career in *Skatuve* is the director and actor Regnārs Vaivars. In 1996 he made two provocative performances there – "White Wedding" by Tadeusz Rózewicz and "Alice" after works and letters of Lewis Carroll – later continuing his career as an independent director and working in different Latvian theatres. *Skatuve* hosted a significant number of diploma performances of acting and directing students of the Latvian Academy of Culture [Jonīte and Tišheizere 2021: 177–181], as well as became the basis of regular acting courses for young people. Later the next generation of independent theatres founded around 2009–2010 took over the role of a start-up platform, providing better circumstances and management to the young theatre-makers. Gradually *Skatuve* lost its followers and supporters and was able to survive only thanks to Eižvertiņa's almost fanatical enthusiasm. As of 2020, the independent theatre *Skatuve* is closed.

In 1996 two actors of Liepāja Theatre who were unsatisfied with their jobs at the institutional theatre founded an independent theatre called *Mūris* ("The Wall") in Liepāja. One of them – Mārtiņš Vilsons – had left the theatre, but another one – Leons Leščisniskis – combined his work in both milieus. Vilsons was inspired by a workshop on socially inclusive theatre for young audiences that he had attended in Denmark in the mid-90s and decided to create a travelling theatre company, which would deliver workshops and performances for children and young audiences. The theatre struck a relatively good rental deal with private owners on a venue close to the very centre of the city. To secure the running of the theatre Vilsons opened a restaurant; however, this business model soon appeared to be too exhausting for an actor whose true intentions were to make a good theatre. *Mūris* was one of several examples of establishing an independent theatre or company as an alternative to the institutional system that did not last long due to lack of a strong artistic vision and managerial strategy in difficult economic circumstances. Most of the independent theatres were not remarkable or consistent in terms of innovation in the context of



the Latvian theatre. There were few aesthetically truly alternative companies founded in the late 80s – Theatre Studio No. 8<sup>1</sup> and *Apsēstā māja* (“The Obsessed House”)<sup>2</sup> –, as well as Ansis Rūtentāls’ Movement Theatre (ARMT), which was established already in the late the 70s and still exists today. However, the first two existed only for a few years, and their activities and traces in the Latvian theatre still require in-depth research. The ARMT, its artistic leader Ansis Rūtentāls (1949–2000) and his followers represent a unique and separate aesthetic direction in Latvian theatre that at some points intersects with a contemporary dance, and also requires further attention from researchers. In the mid-90s after a short confusion, institutional theatres started to attract almost any artistically interesting initiative, especially if it already had proved itself within the independent scene.

### New Aesthetics in Old Frameworks

The new aesthetics in the Latvian theatre that were soon labelled by the dominant critical discourse as *postmodern* appeared in the 90s mainly due to the work of the younger generation of theatre directors who started their careers in 1993 (Alvis Hermanis) and 1996 (The Atelier of Unbearable Theatre). In his first productions at NRT Hermanis “*affirmed his disregard of the traditional theatre, labelling it as philistine, and trying to create a different, multifunctional theatre model where performances do not become repetitive*” [Zeltiņa 2007: 223]. Hermanis debuted with the staging of Steven Soderbergh’s film script “Sex, Lies, and Videotape” (1989) under the title “Returning is Like a Slow and Peaceful River” (1993).

*“It was a new voice, a new approach to a theatre. A director appeared who tackled intriguingly the problems he and the audience, especially younger spectators, were interested in, and he did it in a modern, fresh theatre language where metaphoric imagery and ambiguity (ice, pigeons, ropes, lemons) organically fused with the basic postulates of the minimized psychological theatre”* [Zeltiņa 2007: 225].

In each of his following productions – be it Yukio Mishima’s *Madame de Sade*, Marguerite Duras’s “The Malady of Death” under the title “Secret Pictures”, Oscar

<sup>1</sup> The establishment of the Theatre Studio No. 8 was approved by the Riga City Committee of Lenin’s Communist Youth Union of Latvia in 1987. At the Perestroika time, it was the only way to establish an independent theatre according to the newly adopted “Regulations on the studio theatre on a collective (brigade) contract” in Moscow in 1987. The names associated with this company are Modris Tenisons, Lauris Gundars, Romāns Baumanis, Jānis Deinats, Jānis Polis, Imants Vekmanis, Ivars Puga.

<sup>2</sup> The Obsessed House was a company that grew out of the amateur theatre group led by theatre director Ilmārs Ēlerts.

Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray", Antonio Buero Vallejo's "In the Burning Darkness", or Anton Chekhov's "The Seagull" – Hermanis tried out a different aesthetic approach refreshing the whole idea of a theatre in Latvia. He became almost the only directing authority for the younger generation of theatre-makers.

In 1996, while still studying at the Latvian Academy of Culture, three young theatre directors – Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, Viesturs Kairiņš and Gatis Šmits – announced the foundation of The Atelier of Unbearable Theatre (The Atelier). This was the first generation of theatre directors educated in independent Latvia. Between 1996 and 1997, they produced seven performances at the Daile Theatre Chamber Hall based on the works of Alexander Pushkin, Samuel Beckett, William Shakespeare, Ernesto Sabato, and their own texts. One more remarkable avant-gardist of this generation – Regnārs Vaivars – staged his first productions at the independent theatre *Skatuve* and participated as an actor in the performances of The Atelier. With these performances, the young directors introduced themselves to the Latvian theatre scene offering a principally different (but not mutually united) theatre language compared to the mainstream. In an interview in 2003, Dž. Dž. Džilindžers characterizes the position of The Atelier: "*The overall situation in the Latvian theatre seemed to us quite boring, except Alvis Hermanis, who was the only interesting director. We had an internal need to create something of our own, to make the theatre scene in Latvia different, because otherwise people were used to such a uniform theatre*" [Kreicberga 2003: 6]. In their first works, they played out "*the radical break with history [that] is typically identified with the experimental performative practices of the Western avant-garde*" [Harding and Rouse 2006: 10]. They did their best not to follow the kind of theatre that existed before them, namely the so-called psychological realism of the Stanislavsky system that was almost the only and certainly the dominant theatre method during the Soviet era. Together with Alvis Hermanis, they were driven by a certain wish to break with the past. However, this applied exclusively to their artistic strategies, since they were not interested in politics.

The young directors worked with a variety of materials – they produced texts by contemporary foreign authors, interpreted and deconstructed classics, and composed their own texts. Critics and spectators were surprised and puzzled by the fact that they mostly did it in a completely new way, without the usual psychological analysis of the text, talking frankly about topics that had little or no presence in the theatre so far (such as sexuality, for instance). Strategies of fragmentation and visuality, emphasis on the intimacy of the text and psychoanalytic approach showed that they were not interested in the story itself and did not care if the audience would understand it. They were not interested in social or political issues. Instead, they were interested in the hidden potential of the narrative that would encourage them to use non-verbal means. The young directors also avoided



traditional psychological realism in acting, as if they had forgotten what they had learned during their studies, and made their actors forget it as well. They were often blamed for being *unprofessional* while working with actors. Theatre critic Silvija Radzobe wrote, not without irony:

*“It seems that our postmodernists of the younger generation of theatre directors made a mistake in logic. They have reduced the psychological realism dominating in the Latvian theatre to socialist realism and rushed to overcome it. Their claims that they do not need to master the method of psychological theatre because their theatre will be radically different are absurd”* [Radzobe 2004: 151–152].

From today’s perspective, it is clear that these directors deliberately refrained from using well-known and accustomed acting techniques in a serious search for a contemporary acting style and the presence of the actor on stage. They introduced and developed such approaches as an actor-sign (in the work of Vaivars, Kairiņš and in several shows by Hermanis); or an actor physically embodying the atmosphere of the performance (in Gatis Šmits’ performances); or an actor who appropriates the intimacy of the text to such an extent that it becomes almost documentary (in Hermanis’ early performances). Later on, all of them proved being able to practice psychological theatre as well and mix different approaches and styles even in one performance.

Although in the 1990s, due to socio-economic changes, a situation arose for the potential introduction of new forms of theatre organization, the most talented and aesthetically strong directors chose to work in comparatively safer structures – institutional repertory theatres. After five years of the spontaneously and intuitively managed laboratory environment at NRT, its artistic director Juris Rijnieks resigned, and in 1997 the Ministry of Culture appointed the young and promising director Alvis Hermanis as the artistic director of this theatre. This was a unique situation in the Latvian theatre history when the new artistic director of a state theatre was able to choose the actors for his company; moreover, potentially he could choose a different operating model. Hermanis created an ensemble of the most talented actors of the younger generation and made a rational decision to return to the classic and usual model of a repertory theatre. The Atelier, which had raised hopes for a new and strong independent theatre company on the scene, appeared to be a marketing trick, as its creators later admitted. After gaining the attention of theatre professionals and the public the directors integrated into repertory theatres – Hermanis invited Viesturs Kairiņš and Gatis Šmits as in-house directors of NRT, and Džilindžers was regularly working at the Daile Theatre, later becoming its artistic director. Regnārs Vaivars initially played the role of an independent on the margins, and he continues to stage

performances in various Latvian theatres to this day. In other words, these directors began their work in the Latvian theatre in potentially alternative structures and they could have become an avant-garde in this respect as well, but the experimental phase ended with a return to more stable and entirely traditional structures. This has significantly affected the underdevelopment of the diversity of the production models in the Latvian theatre.

### Instead of a Conclusion

In comparison with its closest neighbours – Estonia and Lithuania – where the initial context at the beginning of the 90s was similar, we can see that in Latvia there is the smallest number of independent theatres (about 15 in 2020). Their number has increased only during the last decade and only few of them have managed to define their specific style and to produce continuously, successfully, and internationally. Statistics gathered by the Estonian Theatre Agency show that in Estonia, in 2018, there were 36 privately owned theatres [*Eesti Teatri Agentuur* 2020], and part of them get regular subsidies from the Estonian Ministry of Culture. In Lithuania, there were 37 non-governmental theatres in 2018 according to the statistics gathered by the Lithuanian Statistics Department [*Lietuvos statistika* 2020]. In Latvia, there are no statistics regarding the independent or non-governmental theatres, and this fact also proves their unclear status. The number of independent theatres is not an end in itself. However, these remarkable differences in comparison to neighbouring countries clearly demonstrate that under initially more or less the same conditions in each country theatre has developed in different direction depending on individually and collectively made decisions by artists and policy makers that are shaped by tradition, education, experience and ideology. In the 1990s in Latvia the potential of the aesthetic avant-garde very quickly moved from the independent scene to institutional theatres which could provide comparatively safer production conditions. In 2012, Dragan Klaić anticipated that “*groups, short-term initiatives, programmed venues and production houses, festivals, studios and research facilities complete the public theatre landscape. All these production and distribution models have a functional merit and deserve equal access to public subsidy, determined by recent achievements and plans for the future, not by tradition, prestige and historically established privileges*” [Klaić 2012: 175]. In 2020 in Latvia, there is still a lack of diversity of production models and artistic methods relevant to the current context. However, the younger generation of theatre makers questions the dominance of institutional theatres more often deliberately choosing to work outside the conventional structures.

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