

LATVIAN THEATRE IN PANDEMIC TRANSITION: EXPERIENCE OF BALTIC DRAMA FORUM 2020

Dr.art. Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča

*Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music,
Latvian Theatre Labour Association, Latvia*

Abstract

The breakout of Covid-19 pandemic and the related social distancing requirements closed all theatres and forced everyone to move to digital platforms and look for alternative presence solutions in public events. It also made us reconsider the term *liveness* in the context of screen-mediated theatrical experience and brought to hybrid solutions that would have not been accepted previously. The article tackles the development of theatre processes during the first period of emergency state in Latvia (March – June, 2020) and aims to document the experience of theatre forum organized at the beginning of November 2020 literally on the threshold of the second-wave related lockdown in culture. It aims to address to immediate impacts of Covid-19 to theatre ecosystem in Latvia and illustrate the ongoing way to inevitable changes in culture industry.

Keywords: *pandemic, theatre, online, transition, mediatization, Baltic Drama Forum.*

The year 2020 is a memorable year in the world of the performing arts, and we probably cannot predict the long-term consequences yet. The breakout of Covid-19 pandemic and the related social distancing requirements closed all theatres and forced everyone to move, at least partially, to digital platforms and look for alternative presence solutions in public events. It also made us reconsider the term “liveness” in the context of screen-mediated theatrical experience and brought to hybrid solutions that would have not been accepted previously. While still discussing the definition and status of e-theatre on today’s Latvian scene, the current ecosystem of Latvian theatre step by step adapts to new normality of online presence of the audience in daily meetings, conferences, showcases and festivals.

In March 2020, like many other European countries, Latvia went for the first emergency state caused by the spreading virus. It resulted in interrupted theatre season and first attempts of online theatre, exploring the interaction between actors and technologies, virtual presence and experimental hybridization of theatre and film techniques in terms of camera use, combination of pre-recorded and live acting and new policies of access to the performing arts. In Latvia, theatre is (or, at least, was before the pandemic) an important part of cultural and social life; therefore all involved parties looked for alternative ways to keep theatre alive during the lockdown – online readings performed by actors (i. e. Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* recorded by Gundars Āboliņš, the actor of New Riga Theatre and, independently, by theatre company KVADRIFRONS at the same time), remote rehearsals on *Skype* or *Zoom*, first ideas of e-theatre projects, while audience immersed in the abundant free online streaming offer of theatre recordings suddenly made available from the entire world. Friedrich Krotz states that media modifies communication: “*Media operate simultaneously on four different levels: as a technology, as social institution, as organizational machine, a way of setting content in a scene, and a space of experience of the recipient*” [Krotz 2009: 23]. Pandemic justified the use of media in theatre, producing direct impact to all levels defined by Krotz, and for now, we can only guess whether the communication between theatre makers and audience will remain to a certain degree irreversibly modified.

At the end of March 2020, first live online performances were announced, giving the floor to new experience of small or mid-scale productions adapted for watching on screens: people bought tickets online and joined live online performances at 7 PM virtually. The first successful attempt at online theatre in Latvia was “Ice Fishing” (*Bļitka*, 2016, dir. by Dž. Dž. Džilindžers), a dialogue performed by actors Egons Dombrovskis and Kaspars Gods produced by *Goda Teātris*, an independent theatre in Liepāja and performed through cameras on March 26 in an empty club-café *Wiktoria*. On April 4, another independent theatre, Gertrūdes Street Theatre followed suit in more advanced form, adapting its production of “Tanya’s Birthday” to a web version performed live on *Zoom*. Originally, the performance imitates a birthday gathering around a big table, with the audience and actors sharing the birthday meal, singing songs and joining in conversations and the party. In the web version, the interaction and engagement are different due to the changed space conditions. American theatre scholar Bruce McConachie writes: “(..) *theatre usually has more in common with face-to-face conversation than do other mediated events, such as viewing films and websites*” [McConachie 2008: 1]. The engagement happening in virtual space shared by remotely assisting audience member will be definitely the issue for further research in the context of theatre not only during pandemic, but also in post-pandemic

circumstances. Nevertheless, the production “Tanya’s birthday” similarly to GIT’s advertising of the performance states: “if the audience does not come to the theatre, the theatre goes to the audience”, inviting everybody to dress up, prepare a meal and join in virtually to celebrate Tanya’s birthday on *Zoom*.

While screen-adapted theatre productions covered the need for relatively immediate solutions of theatre’s existence during the pandemic and related self-isolation of people, the first purposefully made online performances launched a new type of theatre *pro forma* inevitably pointing at the fact that on-screen theatre probably will not be as temporary as theatre community might wish. Viesturs Kairiņš, the artistic director of Daile Theatre purposefully took the challenge of staging the first online theatre series based on the play “The Enthusiasts” (*Die Schwärmer/ Jūsmotāji*, 2020) by Austrian playwright Robert Musil, staged remotely with seven actors using *Skype* in rehearsing process, making recordings of semi-played readings and dividing the production into 15- to 20-minute series posted online in sequence. On May 8–9, “Iran Conference” by Ivan Vyrypaev staged remotely in *Zoom* platform by Elmārs Senkovs continued the Latvian e-theatre in new quality, taking the advantage of the pandemic intermission in theatre and engaging eleven actors from different theatre companies to join in a brand-new production that demonstrated the pandemic transition in theatre and subsequently triumphed in the *Performers’ Night*, the annual Latvian Theatre Award, in the special nomination “Event of the year in digital environment”. The jury opted for such a nomination to articulate the presence of e-theatre still hesitating to include it in the general picture of Latvian theatre. “Iran Conference” was an embodied example of media changing the communication according to previously quoted Friedrich Krotz in the context of theatre – the production proved *Zoom* serve as technology, organizational machine and a way of conducting content to the experience of recipient avoiding form dominating over artistic qualities of the production in terms of immersion. In a way, Latvian theatre environment proved to be adaptive and able to react rather fast to the unprecedented circumstances, engaging partners in technologies for new experiments as in case of e-theatre project “White Cube” (*Baltais Kubs*, 2020) by Latvian National Theatre consisting of several small-scale digital theatre productions followed by *Zoom* conversation sessions between the audience and the creative team. Live or recorded, during the emergency state caused by Covid-19, theatre in Latvia moved to screens. At the time it seemed a temporary shift, since the summer gave back the usual presence theatre, at least partially: in open-air festivals or semi-filled theatre halls as prescribed by gathering restrictions and distancing requirements. Covid-19 behaviour protocol has left imprints on theatre repertory as well, making small-scale chamber productions involving one or few actors prevail. Unfortunately,

this *survival kit* cannot be applied to all genres. Opera, for instance, is one of the best examples proving the impact and consequences of this hectic season in terms of losses.

Keeping all aforementioned in mind, let us turn to the experience of Baltic Drama Forum – a relatively small-scale theatre festival including academic conference, a showcase of current Latvian theatre productions and other activities. Baltic Drama Forum is the event that every third year gathers in Riga theatre critics, researchers, producers, journalists and theatre makers from the Baltic States and other countries. The forum aims to discuss the topical issues in performing arts and theatre particularly, uncover latest trends in national drama scene, show the selected productions and nominees for the Performers' Night – Latvian National theatre award and to share the impressions on current state of affairs in theatre field in Latvia and in the region. The experience of 2017 gathering in Riga around fifty professionals from Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Belgium and Russia as well as established contacts through international theatre festivals and academic conferences worldwide, initially allowed to dream about extended scope of the event in 2020. However, 2020 brought many challenges to people accustomed to free travelling and forced to change plans. The lockdown in many European countries and general far stopped the circulation of people outside the so called “Baltic bubble”, where the virus rate was relatively lower than in other European countries until the autumn. In September, Latvian Theatre Labour Association started the coordination work for Baltic delegations of theatre people to come to Riga. At the time, the remote presence and digital showcase did not seem appropriate for the planned forum due to the lack of additional funding for technical solutions and enough digitally adapted contents to be offered for foreign audiences, although the closest ones from the neighbouring countries. Baltic Drama Forum 2020 planned to host the following events: the international conference *Theatre & new technologies and different watching experiences* to share the newest research results and present recent experiences including, but not limited to following themes: mediatization, digitalization, distance communication and tech-based artistic strategies developing in Baltic theatre¹; the experts' panel discussion *Theatre and the audience in next hundred years*² covering the communicative dimension of performing arts; the presentation of the printed and electronically available compendium of theatre-related articles “Contemporary Latvian Theatre 2010-2020. A Decade Bookazine” in English; and the showcase of selected eleven recent Latvian

¹ Conference recording available: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=372044050885380&ref=search>

² Discussion video available: <https://www.facebook.com/LKAKademija/videos/2700381473537659>

theatre productions¹ followed by the public discussion² of relevant theatre critics and experts from the Baltic States. In partnership with Latvian Academy of Culture, the academic activities of the forum were included in the conference series *Culture Crossroads* held during the first week of November 2020.

In autumn, the “Baltic bubble” maintained from May to September burst, starting from sharply increasing breakout of Covid-19 in Lithuania followed by self-isolation restrictions in Latvia for travellers unless special measures applied through the procedure of the Ministry of Culture basing on temporary work relationship in culture and arts field. For organizers of Baltic Drama Forum, it meant the mandatory hybridization of organizing model in terms of accepting the participation of Lithuanian conference speakers remotely. As for the showcase, due to the above-mentioned reasons only few productions were available for broadcasting online. Estonians, in their turn, followed the daily news updates and, despite the number of people planning to travel to Riga reduced by half, eagerly looked forward to their trip to probably the only foreign theatre forum they could attend in presence in 2020. On November 4, with seven Estonian theatre professionals – critics, researchers and makers – present instead of 40–60 foreign guests, the Baltic Drama Forum 2020 was opened in Theatre House of Latvian Academy of Culture *Zirgu pasts* with *Facebook* live video broadcasting reaching the audience of the conference and discussions in different geographical locations in Latvia, the Baltic states and worldwide. The forum proved quality overcoming quantity with enriching papers presented in the conference “*Theatre & new technologies and different perspectives*” – one of the most important forum events that allowed sharing experience, the results of the latest research in theatre research and practice, and exchange the information, which is one of the most valuable assets regarding the ongoing processes in performing arts during the pandemic. The discussion *Theatre and the audience in next hundred years*

¹ Programme of the Baltic Drama Forum Showcase 2020: S. Ukhanov “A Draft” (*Melnraksts/Chernovik*, online performance dir. by Vladislavs Nastavševs, Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre, 2020); D. McMillan “Lungs” (*Elpa* dir. by Dmitrijs Petrenko, Daile Theatre, 2020); *LV vs RU* (dir. by Reinis Boters, KVADRIFRONS, 2019); R. Bugavičute-Pēce “The boy who saw in the dark” (*Puika, kas redzēja tumsā*, dir. by Valters Silis, Latvian National Theatre, 2019); V. Belševica “The White Lady” (*Baltā sieva*, virtual performance of 23 min, dir. by Valters Silis, Latvian National Theatre, 2020); R. Askins “Hand to God” (*Nelabā roka*, dir. by Kārlis Krūmiņš, Ģertrūdes Street Theatre, 2019); “The country of grandmothers” (*Vecmāmiņu valsts*, dir. by Paula Pļavniece, KVADRIFRONS, 2019, video recording); G. Garcia-Lorca “The Empty Flower/Yerma” (*Tukšais zieds/Jerma*, dir. by Ināra Slucka, Latvian National Theatre, 2020); M. Zālīte “Margarete” (*Margarēta*, presence and digital production dir. by Reinis Suhanovs, Latvian National Theatre, 2020); J. Jokela “Finlandization” (dir. by Valters Silis, Latvian National Theatre, 2020); “The Depraved Ones” (dir. by Krista Burāne, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2019).

² Discussion video available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awTiE_Vbwfc

participating Latvian stage director Valters Sīlis, producer Maija Pavlova and theatre and film critic Dārta Ceriņa as well as theatre researcher Anneli Saro, artistic director of festival DRAAMA Hedi-Liis Toome and theatre maker Paul Piik from Estonia. The participants of the discussion questioned possible twists and turns in relationship between the theatre and audience in the next hundred years, touching the social aspects brought in the spotlight by the pandemics, such as free access culture, status of freelancers, interaction with digital environment and other contexts shaping the nearest future of theatre. Thanks to the online broadcasting on *Facebook* the Baltic Drama Forum events reached several thousands of people.

The pandemic has taught us to take last minute decisions and be ready for pop-up solutions. It has closed the usual door for a while, but opened different opportunities through technologies that form integral part of today's communication process, and theatre is part of communication in art. 2020 is the year everybody is wearing masks, literally, and facing unprecedented challenges. On the one hand, theatre has increased its social engagement and participation in activism, teaching on biodiversity or minorities' rights, on the other – it stands on the edge of technological and virtual communication abyss. Baltic Drama Forum was an attempt to adapt to the inevitable transition leading to new and unknown normality paved by doubt and fear of dissolution on virtual space and digital jungle. In terms of showcase, Latvian theatre in 2020 was not ready for full digital showcase. Most performances included in the programme took place in rather traditional theatre spaces, when audience is physically present under the same roof as the performers. Two examples of e-theatre, "A Draft" by Vladislavs Nastavševs and the original ghost story, actually a solo performance by the actress Madara Botmane, "The White Lady" by Valters Sīlis represented the experimental part of pandemic theatre in aesthetically flirting with Internet platforms and social network tools. Besides, from the organizer's point of view, it seemed wrong to offer our Estonian guests the screen instead of live performance in theatre, that would probably be considered standard on the day this article is published. The only exception was the production "The Country of Grandmothers" that was shown as a video recording due to the direct impact of pandemic to the theatre process. This story is worth a few lines. "The Country of Grandmothers" is a project initiated by the theatre company KVADRIFRONS involving local communities of different cities of Latvia (Valmiera, Liepāja, Cēsis, Tukums) through the participation of local amateur choirs in the production. The showcase week included a scheduled performance in Tukums. However, the governmental restrictions of gathering including the suspended rehearsals of amateur choirs impeded the rehearsing with the local amateur choir and subsequently forced to cancel the performance. Therefore, a video recording of the project performed in Cēsis was submitted for the showcase, opening a new field of experience also for the

audience. Estonian playwright and director Paul Piik said: “*Despite we saw the video recording of the performance, I even saw some advantages in this form. Firstly, all of us were together in the dark hall and we could identify with the cameraman, who shot the performance. Secondly, we felt and heard the immersion of the audience present in Cēsis. Actually, I liked the video was filmed using a single camera, it provided some authenticity of presence*” [interview to the author, <https://www.kroders.lv/runa/1529>].

The effect of video recording shown in an empty hall with only a few spectators present despite the low-tech emergency solution created unique circumstances for the reception of the particular show and brought in new concept of liveness provided by the perspective of camera man sitting in the audience in Cēsis. After-show meeting with Reinis Boters, the actor of KVADRIFRONS, turned into sparkling session of questions and answers about different ethic and artistic perspectives of the show portraying the world of grandmothers in today’s Latvia represented by sentimental songs of their youth, TV shows and ads, low pensions and other social contexts played by young actors. Along with “The Boy who saw in the dark” – the production portraying the story of a boy born to visually impaired parents and grown up as the only seeing person in a visually impaired community, the video recording of “The country of grandmothers” brought in light the social theatre in a truly antisocial theatre season.

Maybe in a few years we will discuss the use of biorobots or artificial intelligence on stage, all festivals and showcases will be just a few clicks away and VR extension to the show will be as natural as a sauce to barbecue. For now, the Baltic Drama Forum experience in 2020 proves that the use of information and communication technologies can grow into new co-working and virtual presence platforms overnight and potentially turn into a new arsenal of means of expression in performing arts. In 2020 we have been technologically vulnerable and dependant on our individual digital skills on and behind the scenes. The paradoxical question that can be raised in terms of theatre development – does the improvement of digital and technological skills bring benefits to theatre apart from smart technical solutions in new contexts of long-term of social distancing and culture lockdown? Most probably, only a few people working in theatre field had heard of *Zoom*, the application of videoconferencing, before the pandemic. What made *Zoom* an interest for the investors was the video-first mentality as *Zoom* was focusing on videoconferencing from the first day in comparison with *Skype*, that started with audio connection. Today, in 2021, *Zooming* is a standard form of communication for hundreds of million people around the globe. And theatre community is not an exception.

In Latvia as in many other countries pandemic transition brought nearly everything we consider public culture to virtual space and online mode that it has never happened before. The production of “Iran Conference” by Elmārs Senkovs in form

represents the new type of communication that has become a regular practice during the last twelve months. The director captured the right moment in all possible meanings, since this project would not happen in *normal circumstances*, all the involved actors being constantly busy in their theatre companies. In case Latvia goes for conceptually virtual showcase one day, “Iran Conference” would be the first production on the list for theatre artistry and liveness achieved virtually without emphasizing *Zoom* as a tool or environment *per se* as, for instance, it is used in “Margarete” directed by Reinis Suhanovs literally serving as *Zoom* in communication between the Lawyer and Margarete and *Zoom* as the platform for attending audience.

American writer Kevin Kelly in his bestseller “The Inevitable” describes twelve technological forces that will shape our future in the next 30 years starting from 2016. He argues that the best strategy is to understand and embrace the inevitable development of technologies that takes over the world. We have to accept, for instance, the state of continuous beginning, continuous innovations and our state of continuous *newbies* that need to upgrade constantly in order to go on. And we have to deal both with terminology and the phenomena the terms represent in performing arts, such as cognifying, flowing, screening, accessing, sharing, filtering, remixing, interacting, tracking, questioning and other [see Kelly 2016]. The interaction of technologies brings in questions of proportion of live and mediatized theatre in future. Alvis Hermanis, the well-known Latvian stage director said: “*It seems that in the future theatre, the physical presence will become even more important than it has been until now, and, for example, the utilization of video in the theatre plays will be regarded as tasteless, to say the least, or even as tactless. Theatre will be like a zoo, where the public will come to take a look at live real human beings*” [Mellēna-Bartkeviča 2020a: 1888].

Epilogue

On 9 November 2020, the government of Latvia declared the emergency state anew, keeping all theatres closed at least until April 6, but most probably, until the summer. Most theatre festivals over the world build digital platforms to provide the international showcases in virtual space. There are more than a dozen theatre productions ready to show since autumn. Latvian theatre critics have started a project of *fakeviews* – publishing essays in a form of reviews about the performances they haven’t seen yet. New normality of theatre processes will be an issue to question for at least the next decade.

Conclusions

- The pandemic transition brought nearly everything we consider public culture to virtual space and online mode that has never happened before.

Theatre and music are the most affected areas requiring post-pandemic recovery strategies.

- First purposefully made online theatre performances in Latvia launched a new type of theatre *pro forma* inevitably pointing at the fact that on-screen theatre probably will not be *just temporary*. The emerging phenomenon opens the discussion of new theatre terminology – do such notions as *digital theatre*, *virtual theatre*, *e-theatre*, *online theatre* represent the same thing or not, and what are the differences (in this article the distinction is not made on purpose, in order to keep the mood of transition).
- Baltic Drama Forum experience in 2020 proves that the use of information and communication technologies can grow into new co-working and virtual presence platforms overnight and potentially turn into a new arsenal of means of expression in performing arts. Yet, the purposes and the extent of use of technologies in theatre have to be questioned in order to keep the uniqueness of non-mediated theatre experience as a value in today's over-mediatized reality.

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