

ACTING ON THE SCENE OF POLITICAL THEATRE: LEFTIST DRAMA STUDIOS IN RIGA 1920–1930

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Abstract

The article discusses the political theatre scene in Latvia, focusing on the cases of the leftist drama studios at the Riga People's High School (1920–1928), the Riga Central Bureau of Trade Unions (1924–1928), and the Riga Workers' Theatre (1926–1934). This research showcases conflicts and significant differences in opinion between the approaches taken by the radical socialist wing and the left-centrist position. For a more comprehensive understanding, the paper delves into specific examples of these differences by analysing methods of drama studios and revealing the nuanced dynamics within Latvia's political theatre scene. The radical wing ideas were developed by Asja Lācis (locally known as Anna Lāce, née Liepiņa, 1891–1979). Her avant-garde artistic approach to rehearsals as self-sufficient devised performances aimed to generate self-activity in participants. In that case, radical amateurism was proclaimed as the left-wing socialist point of view and approach related to agitprop theatre. On the contrary, the moderately left-centre social democrats developed the idea of socially engaged modernist theatre led by directors and pedagogues Olga Bormane (1893–1968), Jurijs Jurovskis (real name Georgijs Saruhanovs, 1894–1959) and Jānis Zariņš (1893–1979). Riga Workers' Theatre incorporated the drama studio of Riga People's High School as a school for actors. Consequently, Workers' Theatre became one of the professional theatre companies in Riga, considered to be on par with the Latvian National Theatre and the Dailes Theatre.

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This article employs a historical-critical approach to examine the intersection of art and socio-political dynamics through textual and performance analysis, including programmatic writings and workers' press. Comparative analysis highlights transnational influences, such as German political theatre and Soviet agitprop, on Latvian leftist performance. Political theatre is approached not only as a practice but also as a metaphor for national emancipation and social transformation. The research complements the history of Latvian theatre with an interdisciplinary perspective, debating the influence of left-wing political movements and their manifestations in theatre. The paper concludes that participatory theatre practices, such as collective creativity, co-authorship, interactive and devised performances, were innovations of the time and enriched the Latvian theatre scene.

Keywords: *leftist avant-garde, participatory theatre practices, Riga Workers' Theatre, Riga People's High School Drama Studio, Riga Central Bureau of Trade Unions Drama Section*

The significant socio-political changes that accompanied Latvia's attainment of independence following World War I found their reflection in the cultural and artistic landscape. Among these, political theatre emerged as a vibrant and contested space, particularly within the left-wing parties' organised movement. The ideology of workers' culture in Latvia paralleled similar movements across Europe, where the arts became a critical space for ideological expression and social change. This article examines the development and dynamics of leftist drama studios in Riga from 1920 to 1934, focusing on the Riga People's High School Drama Studio (1920–1934), the Riga Central Bureau of Trade Unions Drama Section (1924–1928), and the Riga Workers' Theatre (1926–1934). These institutions became significant hubs for exploring the intersection of political ideology and theatrical practice, fostering innovative artistic methods while navigating the ideological tensions of the political spectrum.

The evolution of leftist theatre as a form of counter-hegemonic art has its roots in avant-garde movements. The historical avant-garde, a cultural and artistic movement primarily active in the early 20th century, sought to radically transform society and culture by embracing experimental and revolutionary practices. This movement was deeply connected to leftist ideology, particularly in its critique of existing power structures and its aspiration to align art with political and social change. The essence of the avant-garde, as shared with leftists, was a rebellion against tradition and opposition to established artistic conventions. Movements like Dada, Futurism, Surrealism, and Constructivism embraced disruption, experimentation,

and blending art with life as central principles. Many avant-garde movements were directly involved in political activities. The Italian Futurists initially aligned with revolutionary socialism, though some later diverged toward fascism, while Dadaists and Surrealists explicitly aligned with anarchism and communism. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, as monarchies weakened and democratic ideas gained ground, the emergence of free theatres and people's stages became a widespread response to societal shifts. Latvian efforts to create accessible, socially engaged theatre should be contextualised in the frame of Western and Central European movements such as the German *Volksbühne* (People's Stage) in Berlin or *Théâtre Populaire* (Popular Theatre) in France. In Latvia, as in many European countries, political theatre was closely tied to the rise of social democratic, trade union, and workers' movements. These initiatives aimed to democratise culture, providing opportunities for wider masses of people to engage in artistic and political dialogue.

The hegemonic discourse of academic studies on leftist theatre highlights its evolution in the Soviet Union, Germany, Britain and the United States as both a cultural and political phenomenon. Workers' theatre movements intended their performances to be activist and an emancipatory act [Samuel et al. 1985], contributing to theatrical modernism [Leach 2018] and the transformation of the social function of theatre [Stourac, McCreery 2024]. The more complex context of Central and Eastern Europe challenged this hegemony by alternative or marginalised voices summarised in *A Lexicon of the Central-Eastern European Interwar Theatre Avant-garde* [Kosiński et al. 2023], including critical observations on workers' theatre. In Latvian theatre studies, researchers have focused on leftist theatre as a transit from Russia to Western Europe [Tišheizere 2023] and transnational influences [Paškevica 2006], as well as a medium for activism and community engagement, emphasising collective creativity over individualism as a pedagogical tool [Brinkmanis 2022]. The current topicality of the subject matter is demonstrated by recent studies, such as *World Political Theatre and Performance: Theories, Histories, Practices* [Aragay et al. 2020]. These studies open up global perspectives and delve into diverse contexts—from still operating workers' theatre in Finland to experimental forms in China and Chile. They reflect on what a radical practice can look like in the face of global neoliberalism and demonstrate the adaptability in addressing local sociopolitical issues while adhering to principles of emancipation and cultural critique.

The article's methodological perspective grounded in a historical-critical approach provides the framework for an interdisciplinary examination of art and socio-political dynamics. The research design is based on textual and performance analysis: programmatic articles, performance descriptions, workers' press, as well as comparative analyses, revealing the transnational nature of ideologies and artistic practices, such as the influence of German political theatre or Soviet agitprop.

The article situates Latvian leftist theatre within a broader European context, highlighting its role in shaping local discourses of class, identity, and emancipation. By foregrounding a marginalised regional perspective, this study contributes to a more nuanced and interconnected history of political theatre in 20th-century Europe. The article investigates how Latvian leftist drama studios functioned as sites of political education and community engagement. How did the two main factions within the leftist movement in Latvia, the radical socialist wing and the left-centrist social democrats, employ divergent artistic strategies? How did political theatre contribute to broader debates on democracy, cultural identity, and collective agency? The article also explores the transformation of the Riga Workers' Theatre, which evolved from a training ground for actors at the Riga People's High School into a professional company recognised alongside Latvia's premier theatres, such as the Latvian National Theatre and the Dailes Theatre. This development reflects not only the aesthetic and organisational innovations introduced by the leftist drama studios but also the broader cultural aspirations of the Latvian working class during a period of intense political and social change. The research raises questions from a historical perspective, linking past developments to contemporary practices in post-dramatic theatre, performance, community empowerment, and activism.

Researching historical leftist drama studios today proves particularly relevant for multiple reasons, particularly in understanding the interplay of art, politics, and social movements. Questioning how art has been utilised as a political tool sheds light on its potential for contemporary challenges such as inequality, climate change, and social inclusion. Exploring the history of participatory practices and public engagement remains relevant for contemporary movements seeking to inspire action through cultural means. Historical leftist drama studios provide valuable case studies for understanding aesthetically innovative and politically effective theatre forms. Revisiting the history of Latvian leftist drama studios offers a comparative framework on how global ideas were adapted to local contexts. By examining historical leftist drama studios, this research explores how art shapes and reflects societal values, fostering insights still relevant for addressing the challenges and possibilities of our current cultural and political landscape. This makes the field an invaluable resource for historical scholarship and contemporary practice.

New political reality in young national state. Old and new theatre

The Baltic region's unique socio-political dynamics, particularly in Latvia, presents a compelling framework for understanding its history as a "political theatre." This metaphor reflects the integral role of the theatre in shaping national identity and advancing socio-political causes, especially during the First Latvian National Awakening of the 19th century. Latvian theatre emerged as a vital medium

for asserting cultural identity and resisting the Russification policies of the Russian Empire. Plays written and performed in Latvian allowed the population to reclaim their language and discuss political, social, and literary topics [Hausmanis 2009]. Theatre became a platform for cultivating a shared national self-affirmation and women's emancipation wave [Zelče 2002: 121–129], aligning with the growth of entrepreneurship to secure economic rights [Vanaga 2024: 20–35] to expand Latvians' cultural and social influence. Therefore, Latvian theatre emerged not merely as entertainment, but as a legitimate weapon for political activism and social mobilisation. The metaphor of Latvia as a “political theatre” underscores how the nation served as a subject in broader geopolitical struggles and reflected the tensions between imperial powers and the growing aspirations for national self-determination.

Nevertheless, during the democratic period of Latvia's history, the political struggle for the electorate can be conceptualised as a theatre scene, with the development of theatre practices in the 1920s and 1930s offering a reflection on the prevailing political strife. Political theatre in Latvia emerged and stood both as a participant in the European realm and as a reflection of the unique socio-political dynamics of the Baltic region. It bridged the broader European currents of theatrical experimentation and political engagement with the local struggle for social and cultural transformation. Latvia served as a cultural crossroads where theatrical influences from Europe and Russia converged, creating a distinctive hybrid that enriched and diversified the global theatre landscape. This fusion of artistic traditions allowed Latvian theatre to incorporate a variety of styles, techniques, and ideologies, contributing to its unique identity and impact on the international stage.

The book *Stage Art (Skatuves māksla, 1923)* by Zeltmatis (Ernests Kārklīņš, 1868–1961) and Teodors Lejas-Krūmiņš (1871–1947) explored ideas for revitalising theatre in Latvia, emphasising the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a ‘total work of art’ that integrates multiple artistic disciplines into a unified whole [Hiss 2005]. This idea, also expressed as “synthesis” or “synthetic theatre”, drew inspiration from the Meiningen Ensemble and Carl Hagemann's theoretical principles [Hagemann 1918]. The authors underscore the centrality of the director as a key figure in this innovative approach to theatre. The director is portrayed as a creative authority whose task extends to shaping the entire production process. This involves crafting a comprehensive artistic vision before rehearsals and establishing dramaturgically and aesthetically dynamic compositions in space and time [Zeltmatis, Lejas-Krūmiņš 1923: 68–77]. This point of view suggests that artistic innovation lies in the hands of a director whose creativity asserts the vision, inspires the team, and delivers exceptional works of art. The principle that artistic innovation relies on visionary geniuses is deeply rooted in Romanticism's celebration

of individual creativity, emotional depth, and the transcendence of boundaries. This perspective continues to influence modern artistic discourse, particularly in fields where the role of the creator is central to the work's identity and impact. It also points out the longing for traditional values and a sentiment for autocracy as a more effective form of government than democracy.

On the contrary, avant-garde movements came to demolish traditions. That aspiration was shared with revolutionary movements inspired by Marxist critical stance toward capitalism. Art was seen as a tool for social change and revolutionary transformation, creating a more equitable society. In the realm of theatre, innovations merged political content with experimental forms. For example, agitprop (agitation-propaganda) theatre, prominent in Soviet and European leftist circles, used simple, direct performances to address working-class audiences and incite political awareness. Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre sought to understand politics in unpolitical situations [Barnett 2015: 32], to provoke critical thinking [Carney 2005], and action in audiences rather than passive consumption or entertainment. Collective creativity resonated with ideologies that aimed to break the elitism of traditional art forms by making art more accessible and participatory. Innovations could involve transforming rehearsals into more collaborative workshops, where actors and technical teams contribute actively to the creative process rather than merely executing pre-defined plans. The director's adaptability and willingness to explore new techniques during the rehearsal process as a collective creation were seen as crucial. This perspective highlights the role and the creative potential of teamwork, pushing the boundaries of traditional theatre practices to create fresh, impactful performances. As well, the director is not a dictator. For example, Brecht employed the term "rehearsal director" who does not enter the theatre with an "idea", a "vision", a "blocking plan", a "finished set design" and does not wish to realise "an idea". The director's task is to stimulate and organise the productivity of the actors and team [Brecht 2016: 212]. The "synthesis of arts" was proclaimed by involving all artists – actors, musicians, scenographers, choreographers, technicians – in the co-creation to deliver the message.

The methods of agitprop and epic theatre were brought to Latvia by Asja Lācis. She enabled the political theatre scene. A radical reimagining of art's purpose integrated aesthetic innovations with a commitment to social and political change. The new forms stem from well-planted old ideas and blossomed in favourable conditions for the growth of a young national democratic state.

Enactment of democracy

During Latvia's period of democracy, the political landscape was primarily shaped by parties representing workers and farmers, with the Latvian Social

Democratic Workers' Party (LSDSP) and the Latvian Farmers' Union (LZS) leading the spectrum. Left-wing parties actively competed for the support of the working-class electorate. In 1920, a "leftist cultural coalition" or "united cultural front" was formed to advance shared goals, including the establishment of educational and cultural societies. But in practice, it was the competition and struggle. The political parties implemented "storming" or "conquest" by imposing on their members the obligation to join existing or newly founded cultural organisations, gaining a majority of votes and taking over the leadership of their leading bodies – councils and boards. An example of such a struggle was the Riga People's High School. First, the extreme left socialists took over, but in 1924 the left-centre social democrats won the majority and changed the ideological vector [Gavars 2014: 85–99]. However, ideological divisions within the coalition, particularly between centrist social democrats and far-left socialists, gradually intensified. These internal tensions ultimately shifted the coalition's front inward, leading to fractures and conflicts among its members.

The Riga Central Bureau of Trade Unions (Rīgas Arodbiedrību Centrālbirojs, RABCB, 1919–1928) operated as an affiliate of the Latvian Communist Party (Latvijas Komunistiskā partija, LKP), which was banned from legal activity in Latvia and operated underground. The LKP exerted political influence over nominally independent entities by infiltrating them. The RABCB served as an umbrella organisation for trade unions, advocating radical socio-political changes while covertly opposing the Latvian state system and disseminating propaganda from the LKP Central Committee in the Soviet Union and from the local plant, the Riga Committee. At the LKP's 22nd Conference in June 1923, a directive was issued to establish communist factions within all trade unions [Plakane 2021: 45]. RABCB cultural events served as a platform for political agitation, which presented the socio-political events of the time in the LKP's interpretation not only to the participants of the dramatic section but, of course, to its target audience – workers and the widest possible masses. Active leaders were Vilis Dermanis (1875–1938), Leons Paegle (1890–1926) and Linards Laicens (1883–1938). On July 19, 1928, based on evidence gathered by the Political Administration (Poltipārvalde) confirming anti-state activities, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Eduards Laimiņš (1882–1982), proposed the closure of the RABCB. Investigations revealed that the RABCB had violated its statutory goals by functioning as "a disguised organ of legal activity for the illegal communist party", aimed at unifying workers, inciting revolutionary sentiment, and ultimately pursuing a coup against the Latvian state [LKM, 23044/21707(2)-VII, 1, cit. from Plakane 2021: 48]. The closure of the RABCB marked a decisive state response to the covert operations of communist-affiliated organisations in Latvia during the interwar period. This incident highlights

the tensions between Latvian authorities and underground communist movements, illustrating the broader struggle between democratic governance and revolutionary ideologies in the volatile political landscape of the 1920s.

The drama studios of Riga People's High School (1920–1934) and RABCB Club (1919–1928) mirrored the political struggle and reflected the ideological stances in the methods, topics of interest and productions.

Latvian Theatre October

The cultural transformations introduced in Soviet Russia transitioned to Latvia with the war refugees returning home. Significant influence on the Latvian cultural context, as a “Latvian Theatre October” [Paškeviča 2006: 101] symbolically mirrored the political revolution, aiming to establish theatre as a tool for fostering a unified working-class identity by adapting the ideas and methodologies of Soviet theatre, such as agitprop techniques, small drama forms for collective creativity, and mass spectacles for political engagement. Latvian theatre directors got their professional education and inspiration in Russia. Asja Lācis introduced agitprop methods in leftist drama studios. The militant concepts of the Cultural Front and the revolutionary avant-garde were used to express the fighting mode of the creative intentions of leftists, also in Latvia.

Soviet theatre in the first decades came with the slogan *Everything Anew!* Anatoly Lunacharsky, as the first People's Commissar (NarKom, narodnyj komissar) for education, offered the formulation: “The Revolution said to the theatre: Theatre, I need you!” [Rudnitsky 1988: 41], which means to make a revolution on the stage, move forward with new ideas, study recent events by theatrical methods. The “Theatre October” was proclaimed by Vsevolod Meyerhold while Lunacharsky summoned him to take charge of the Theatrical Department for the entire Soviet Republic, which was transformed into the militant headquarters to fight for the renovation of theatre art, just as crucial as the October Revolution. Alexander Tairov summed up the idea: “A propagandist theatre after a revolution is like mustard after a meal”. [Brown 2016: 164–5]. Meyerhold himself took control of the Free Theatre Company and renamed it the RSFSR Theatre No. 1. The play chosen for the opening on November 7, 1920, was *The Dawn* by Emile Verhaeren, adapted to bring out relevance to recent political events. At the fixed point in the play, the Herald would enter and deliver the latest updates on the Civil War in the territory of Ukraine. Jānis Zariņš, as a witness of the performance, wrote in his memoirs: “As the performance began, a part of the army marched through the hall with flags, with music it went to the stage, lined up, and the officer read a telegram that Perekop had been taken, the enemy had been defeated. Silence fell in the hall, then confusion (...) It had to be coincidental that I, a witness to the battles of Perekop,

was present in the theatre that evening.” [Zariņš 1974: 28] *The Dawn* in Moscow was a major success, performed over a hundred performances to packed houses. Zariņš staged *The Dawn* in the Riga Workers’ Theatre in 1928, later recognised as the first notably highly artistic and innovative performance at the professional level by this company. The other “October” production by Meyerhold was *Mystery-Bouffe* by Vladimir Mayakovsky on May 1, 1921. Zariņš was involved in this production as an actor in the mass, but Asja Lācis witnessed it as a spectator.

The project of the Cultural Revolution was a new policy in the Soviet state to showcase the role of revolution and the hegemony of the proletariat culture, Proletcult. The ideology proclaimed in The Communist Manifesto – the masses as a subject of history led to the main idea – collective creativity. Artistic work was declared as “the mightiest tool for organising the powers of collective” [Kleberg 2015: 8–23]. Theorist of Proletkult Platon Kerzhentsev, a Bolshevik activist, gained extensive theatrical experience during his emigration (1912–1917) in Paris, London, and New York, as well as during his travels in Japan. He presented his ideas at the 1st St. Petersburg Theatre Congress in 1917 and detailed them in his influential book *Creative Theatre* (1918). This work became a handbook with instructions for the theatre reform, widely recognised in Europe and America, reprinted multiple times and translated into German, Italian, and Swedish. The echo chambers of these ideas were implemented as leftist drama studios worldwide, also in Latvia. The quotations from this book became well-known slogans: “Art for the People” or “Democratisation of Theatre” [Kerzhentsev 1923: 47]. “This is not so much necessary to ‘play for the popular audience’ as to help this audience play by themselves. This is the most important task of the democratisation of art. It is necessary to awaken proletarian creativity and help it find appropriate forms of expression.” [Kerzhentsev 1923: 68]. Theatre for the masses was an educational tool. Drama students familiar with the creative principles of performance became active participants in the performance, both on stage and as spectators.

Leftist drama studios used games and creative tasks for participatory practice, such as the Living Newspaper, Theatre Court, Charades, etc. The Living Newspaper transformed standard newspaper content—political editorials, news, and satirical feuilletons—into spoken or theatrical presentations, often performed in costume. Theatre Court performed a legal hearing, for example, Riga People’s House (Rīgas Tautas nams) organised such a performance for the play character Jakubovsky from *Love is Stronger Than Death* (Mīla stiprāka par nāvi, 1927) by Rainis [Latvju Grāmata 1927: 299], but the Workers’ Youth Association Working Youth (Darba Jaunatne) – for the titular character Ģirts Vilks by Rainis [Darba Jaunatne 1933: 5]. Charades were brief theatrical performances designed to challenge the audience to guess a specific word or slogan based on the acting and clues provided by

the performers. Leons Paegle and Linards Laicens wrote drama pieces to be used as inspiration for collective improvisation and performances. These drama forms engaged both performers and the audience in active participation. Rehearsals were open to the public, audience members acted as critics and had an opportunity to step on the stage, contributing to an atmosphere of friendly competition and collective creativity. This dynamic blurred the lines between spectator and performer during leftist evenings or rallies in public squares, fostering an inclusive, collaborative environment rooted in theatrical expression and blending entertainment with political education.

Rehearsals as devised performances, co-creation and self-activity

The leftist drama evenings for the drama studios' participants became an immersive site of political struggle, blending art with life. Pioneering to introduce the new principles of rehearsing and performing, Asja Lācis analysed the outcomes of her experimental work in her seminal articles *New Direction in Theatre* (1921) and *Workers' Theatre at RABCB club* (1926), which provide insights into her approach. After the first year of work with students and producing the mass spectacle *Faces of Centuries* (*Gadsimtu sejas*) by Leons Paegle with more than 200 participants, she wrote: "Theatre is already a collective in its essence, as a synthesis of the arts and it stands closer to the future" [Lācis 1921: 4]. She described theatre as an experimental space, a 'cabinet of experiments', where new traditions are developed. The innovative drive in revolutionary theatre demanded breaking from the past and exploring new forms and styles to align with contemporary societal changes. Asja Lācis envisioned theatre extending beyond traditional venues, engaging directly with people through street processions and festivals. The basic values of theatre to develop are collective creation and actors' self-activity. This approach sought to bridge art and life: "A life-giving direction goes out into the streets and is expressed in people's processions, folk festivals and mass improvisations" [Lācis 1921: 4]. This aligns with her revolutionary ethos, aiming to dissolve the boundaries between performer and audience and between art and life. "We need to head our working method towards the future, not to be buried in the past." Asja Lācis emphasised that the new theatre strives for symbols, stylised realism and simplicity – to express the most thoughts and actions with few means in a concentrated way. "Revolutionary theatre requires a revolutionary form! Theatre needs to be the guiding star that leads to life-art!" [Lācis 1921: 4]. For her, theatre was a transformative tool to inspire and lead society towards revolutionary ideals. She highlighted its role as a unifying and motivating force. Lācis's reflections captured the intersection of avant-garde aesthetics and socialist ideology. Her advocacy for collectivism reflected Marxist principles, aiming to

dissolve the hierarchies within traditional theatre-making. That belief in mass participation fostered empowerment and solidarity.

The second article on workers' theatre emphasised the twofold task of agitation and education. The task of the theatre was to make political demands understandable and to explain the Marxist worldview. The theatre needed to be freed from bourgeois views and formal techniques. There should be nothing sensational or personal; there was no place for the cult of plasticity "for the sake of beauty". Advocating for clear and distinct artistic expression, she exclaims: "The two-dimensional decorative stage and furniture are disposable. The decorative stage is associated with the picturesque, the leisure of viewing and has lagged behind all technical achievements. The theatre of decorations has the speed of a mail carriage, but we need the speed of radio" [Lācis 1926: 9]. Asja Lācis cited collective self-activity as the main working principle. The director should be like a more experienced colleague and supervisor of the process, developing a plan and structure together with the production team, and reworking the play's text together with the actors, adapting it to current combat tasks. Examples provided in the article include productions of charades and the play *Salt of the Earth* (Zemes sāls) by Leons Paegle, as well as a collectively created improvisation *Coalition and Combination*. Lācis stressed out her position: "theatre as fight" [Lācis 1926: 10]. Asja Lācis outlined a transformative vision for workers' theatre, framing it as both a tool for political agitation and an instrument of Marxist education. She rejected bourgeois aesthetics and formalism, advocating for a theatre of collective creation and direct action, free from sensationalism or superficiality. She emphasised rapid adaptability, aligning theatre with revolutionary goals. The director's role as an equal participant and mentor redefined theatre as a dynamic and participatory medium of societal struggle and transformation.

Asja Lācis's input was crucial for the radical leftist drama studios: she founded the Art Studio at Riga People's High School in 1920/21, then, back from travelling Europe, worked at the Riga Central Bureau of Trade Union Club Drama Section in the winter of 1925/26. Debates and polemics in the press initiated by her regarding the political purpose and theatrical practices rooted in leftist ideology ultimately led to the establishment of the Riga Workers' Theatre. In essence, Asja Lācis's vision of theatre was profoundly forward-looking, aiming to redefine the role of art in society and align it with the revolutionary aspirations of her era. Her ideas contributed to the evolution of Latvian theatre as a politically engaged and artistically innovative medium.

Workers' stage: social lift strategy for actors and audience

Riga People's High School, after splitting with the radical wing socialists, proclaimed and implemented the professional approach to searching for a new

direction in theatre. The essence of the actors' studio objectives, outlined in the article dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the studio [Jākobsons 1931: 450], was rooted in aligning theatrical creation with the necessities of the working class. They settled on the main idea of the theatre studio: "Theatre is one of the forms of education that a person receives outside of school, in which the socially useful mental abilities of a person are cultivated, and in which the person himself is prepared for a fuller life with a developed and formed mind, feelings, and will." It emphasised a systematic and purposeful approach to theatre-making, community engagement in interest in theatre and education, collaborative connections with workers' institutions, advocating an active art form that shapes with the era, and rejecting the romanticised retreat into the past of conservative artists.

The mass spectacles were prepared for the open-air venues. Such productions took place every summer, one notable example was the performance *Nothing is not Nothing Anymore* (*Nieki vairs nav nieki*) by Kārlis Dziļleja at Arkādija's Park by Riga Workers Theatre, actors' studio of People's High School and drama studio of Trade Unions' (RABCB) Club in 1927. This framework positioned the actors' studio as a hub of socially engaged art, where theatre served as both a reflection of its time and a catalyst for societal transformation. It was driven by the belief that art must actively contribute to the epoch of great transformations, inspiring and mobilising the collective spirit.

The studio served as a training ground for actors, stage artists, and ideological leaders, eventually forming the foundation of the Workers' Theatre ensemble established in 1926. It provided comprehensive professional development under the guidance of accomplished directors such as Olga Bormane, Yuri Yurovsky, and Jānis Zariņš, among others. Specialised training included speech techniques by Emīls Mačs, choreography and physical expression by Felicita Ertneire and Sam Hior, and theoretical lessons on theatre history and drama by Kārlis Dziļleja and Edgars Šillers. Broader educational subjects such as psychology, philosophy, aesthetics, and logic were taught by prominent figures like Pēteris Birkerts and Teodors Celms, while active art, social history, and Marxist ideology were presented by educators such as Andrejs Kurcijs and Bruno Kalniņš. The studio introduced innovative theatrical techniques, including interactive interludes, choral speech, and movement chorus, enriching the repertoire and performance style. Actors underwent two-year training programs and participated in productions during their studies. By 1928, the Riga Workers' Theatre had incorporated the Riga People's High School Drama Studio as its official actor training school, solidifying its role as a hub for progressive theatrical education and experimentation.

The drama studio functioned as a transformative social lift, empowering individuals from working-class and uneasy backgrounds to become integral contributors to the cultural and ideological landscape. By offering affordable

education encompassing acting, stagecraft, and theoretical knowledge alongside broader subjects such as philosophy, psychology, and social history, the studio enabled participants to gain skills and perspectives that transcended traditional artistic training. Its integration into the Workers' Theatre provided opportunities for upward mobility, allowing participants to transition from trainees to professional artists. Many graduates went on to become influential theatre professionals, including theatre and cinema directors such as Leonīds Leimanis, Nikolajs Mūrnieks, Arnolds Štams, as well as actors like Lūcija Baumanē, Luijs Šmits, and Hermanis Vazdiks, among others, who significantly contributed to the evolution of Latvian theatre. In this way, the studio bridged educational, artistic, and societal gaps, establishing itself as a critical mechanism for social progression and cultural democratisation.

The fight for workers' attention through theatrical means emerged as a strategic objective to expand the reach of leftist ideology and mobilise the working class. Theatrical activities served not just as an accessible and engaging platform for political and social education. By involving workers in the production process—writing plays, creating scenery, performing, and organising sports or choir acts—these initiatives ensured active participation. The goal was to present a unique form of theatre deeply rooted in workers' experiences and perspectives. This approach combined dilettantism with a professional approach involving amateur chorus and sports activities in the performances, not as a flaw but as a defining characteristic that made the performances authentic and relatable to the intended audience: "A wide array of dilettantism should be presented, thoroughly workers', peculiar in its content, interesting for observations." [Kārklīš 1926: 6]. By emphasising content that was engaging and compelling, this form of theatre aimed to democratise cultural production, making it accessible, participatory and resonant with the workers' lived experiences. Such initiatives were instrumental in competing for the attention of the working-class electorate. These semi-professional theatrical endeavours effectively galvanised support and cultivated solidarity.

Participatory practices of leftist circles and democratically managed educational sites created an immersive environment on the frontline of political struggle. The contribution presented in the paper complements the history of Latvian theatre with a historical-critical and interdisciplinary perspective, providing insight into the democratic period of interwar Latvia reflected in theatre. This study has explored the leftist drama studios and workers' theatre scene in Riga, examining their development, practices, and ideological underpinnings within the broader context of political theatre. The findings highlight the localisation of the global leftist movement and avant-garde, such as agitprop and epic theatre. The confluence, rooted in the ideals of social democracy, radical socialism, and communism, gave rise to aspirations for local political struggles.

The theatrical methods of the leftist drama studios and Workers' Theatre in Riga, such as co-authorship, open rehearsals, devised performances and interactive theatre forms, emphasised self-activity and collective creativity through experimental rehearsal techniques. The far-left socialists proposed radical amateurism instead of trying to fake professionalism. In contrast, the left-centrist social democrats sought to modernise theatre, focusing on socially engaged aesthetics, aiming to balance political engagement with professional artistry. These artistic practices, situated within interwar Latvia's local historical and ideological context, provided an interactive and immersive site as an innovation with lasting contributions to the Latvian theatre scene. The revolutionary pathos of Latvian Theatre October enriched the local theatre scene. Theatre as an educational space for workers marked significant challenges for conventional theatrical forms. These innovations, in resonance with international trends of the political theatre, established a distinctly Latvian interpretation of politically engaged performance. The evolution of leftist studios, culminating in the Riga Workers' Theatre, demonstrated the potential of education and training in sustaining a politically conscious art form. Further research on the leftist theatre could provide valuable insight into how leftist theatre practices and experiences lived through a century ago relate to contemporary art activism, devised and community theatre. Contemporary societies grapple with rising calls to solve migration and integration problems and seek alternatives to political polarisation. Revisiting historical methods inspires the awareness that theatre can serve as a platform for dialogue and activism.

In conclusion, the leftist drama studios in Riga contributed to the advancement of Latvian theatre by engaging with broader European and global political theatrical movements for cultural and political transformation. Their legacy is a testament to the enduring power of theatre as a medium for challenging societal norms and imagining more equitable futures. This research underscores the necessity of preserving and studying such histories to inform current and prospective political and community-oriented theatre.

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