

## TRUE DRAMATURGY VS. FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

**Matīss Gricmanis**

*Latvian Academy of Culture*

### **Abstract**

The paper is an essay about three different autobiographical stories. The play by the author “Being a Nationalist”, the memoir book “Catharsis” (*Katarse*, 2012) by the lawyer Andris Grūtups and 60 notebooks of diaries by the homosexual Kaspars Irbe. The author shows the different approaches a playwright can have and what is his own mode of thinking in structuring “life” for a theatrical performance.

**Keywords:** *autobiography, dramaturgy, playwriting, Soviet history.*

In this paper I will examine some autobiographical works and try to illustrate two ideas. In order to explain why I’m focusing on the mesh of dramaturgy and autobiography; I have to tell a little about myself. One of my plays is an autobiographical story – “Being a Nationalist” (*Būt nacionālistam*, dir. Valters Sīlis, Dirty Deal Teatro, 2017).

Less than eight years ago, during my first year of studies, I was invited to work in the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia as the parliamentary assistant to Imants Parādnieks – a deputy of the party “National Alliance”. Even though partly it was a mere coincidence, it was also the result of my political activism since the age of fourteen. I was part of a marginal group of people with interest in militaristic activities and strong determination to get political power. I came closer to corridors of power than all of my friends but couldn’t bear the coldness of the relationships with my colleagues. After four years I left my job in the Parliament.

It is a little frightening to create dramaturgy from your own life, as I know how brutally one must treat stories in order to tell them in the restricted duration of a movie or play. The stories must be shortened, and then the cut episodes must be shortened a little more – and in the end the director asks you to explain the content of the episode in one sentence. After the play had some success my former boss, still a parliamentary deputy at the time, said: *There are some fabrications, exaggerations and*

*at least once – lies in the play* [Zvirbulis 2017]. Partly, of course, he was right, because life is not concentrated. Life is long and dull. Life happens on its own, while a play must be performed.

The play was about me. About a long period of my life – approximately six years. It is an autobiography on stage. Looking back on the play, I came up with two ideas. I regarded them as interesting enough to share with you. First, the falsity of autobiography comes to light in regard to its audience. Autobiography is a story about oneself. What is its target audience? My autobiography had a purpose to show that I – a young man, who was once a radical nationalist – am still the same man, but one who can now admit his mistakes and his emotions that pushed him towards a job in the Parliament. In real life it seemed like the culmination, but in the play, it was the end of the story. None of the sentences in the play are lies, but the choice of events creates falsehoods. Autobiography is a means to single yourself out, to historicise yourself, though theoretically it aims at self-exposure. No autobiography is egocentric enough to be true. Second, the nature of dramaturgy allows you to be self-centred. Egocentrism is confronted by counter-force – the audience. Everyone is selfish, yet everyone wants to hear applause and wants to be heard. It is possible to write a sickeningly self-absorbed novel, however dramaturgy resists egocentrism in a way. It might be related to the essence of theatre – being together and experiencing everything the play tries to provoke in the audience.

Dramaturgy is always true, as its task is to focus attention. The dramaturgy of documentary theatre is the art of guiding the viewer's attention through facts, events, opinions, and trying to evoke emotions in the audience. Facts and opinions can be false or misleading, but the emotions the story arouses are absolutely real. The main goal of dramaturgy is emotions. Emotions are inconsistent, fickle, fleeting. Emotions and reality are similar concepts. Emotions are created by our senses, just like our perception of reality. That is why I want to show you a strange and unique exception, where autobiography contradicts my main ideas.

I don't know the underlying psychological reasons, but I feel a strong desire for truth in art. Some truth was incorporated in the play "Being a Nationalist", and I wanted to use the same approach again, take life as a whole and create a story, but I have only one life. Ironically enough, historian Ineta Lipša told me about 60 diaries stored in the house of a man who is long gone. It turned out to be true. This was a chance to acquire a new life that I could treat as ruthlessly as my own. Those were the diaries of Kaspars Irbe.<sup>1</sup> He was born in 1906. The first diary entries preserved were written on separate pages when Kaspars was only 20 years old. My story of being a

---

<sup>1</sup> The author of the diaries is Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe (1906–1996). He is from Jūrmala, Latvia. They were stored in his family home, owned by historian Ainars Radovics. The diaries belong to him. All further quotes are from these diaries.

nationalist ended at the age of 19. It was tempting to see another ironical twist of fate that the diaries of Kaspars started when he was 20. As if we were one man living in parallel worlds – the past and the present.

It was tempting to hope Kaspars would resemble me. At the start he really did, or at least I wanted to see him that way. Then I encountered a diary entry, where Kaspars Irbe expresses a wish for his life's work – the 60 notebooks of his diary – to be used by a writer or a scientist-psychologist<sup>1</sup>. It's the target audience of his autobiography. There is no point in lying to psychologist, if you want to receive a fairly adequate assessment of yourself. A writer can be lied to if you want to create a legend instead of a portrait. Something in this duality – an autobiography that is a legend and a personal anamnesis at the same time – seems true and adequate.

An entry from the diary of Kaspars Irbe on **4 August 1940. 12<sup>th</sup> day**. Pay attention to the time dimensions in the text: *A sunny day. There is a chilly wind from the sea right now. Blue skies. I am writing in bed after a few hours' rest at the end of an adventurous night. I got home at 7:30 AM. It was really pleasant to sit in the carriage by the open window and feel the morning breeze. There was a really serious, handsome, large railwayman sitting beside me. I saw the blond boy who performs at night clubs snoozing. He also had a significant night. After I arrived, I went to the grocery shop ("Lilies"). Then I heated some water. When I had cleaned myself properly, I ate breakfast in bed – fresh milk, white bread, butter, jam. Then I rested for a few hours. Now I'm sunbathing in the bright sun, on the green grass. Yesterday I spent the whole day very anxious about the oncoming night's adventures. After getting barely any sleep at night, I took a nap for a few hours. Then I ate cucumbers, etc. Sunbathed. Walked around half-naked in the green, silent garden. I slept in a hammock in the shadow. I looked nice in the white outfit. Velvety soft body. I had a good meal. I rested, even though I was too anxious to sleep. My heart was beating fast. My mother brought me the newspaper. I was reading in bed until 7:15 PM. Then I started getting ready for the night. It was a pleasant, chilly evening.*

*Looking and smelling good, I went along the river to Majori. I had fragrant flowers on my chest. There was a pretty Russian woman with a nice kid in the train. I watched as he clung to his mother seeking shelter. I was once like him. Who doesn't wait for this kid in life? Where is he going to find shelter later on?*<sup>2</sup>

I spent a month in Vilnius, at the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre – developing a reading from the play that is based on the diaries of Kaspars Irbe. The play is called "The Normal Life of a Soviet Citizen Kaspars Irbe" (dir. Matīss Gricmanis,

<sup>1</sup> In one of the notebooks Kaspars writes: "Savas piezīmes labprāt atdotu kādam spējīgam rakstniekam vai zinātniekam-psihologam." / "I would be happy to give my notes to a talented writer or a scientist-psychologist."

<sup>2</sup> Translation by Grēte Grīviņa.

Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, 2018.) The truthfulness of dramaturgy is in the present. At the moment, when we are all together in a dark room, listening and watching what someone else has to show and tell. Unfortunately, diaries no longer reflect the present. Only my experience as a reader is still current. I am reading diaries. I am reading them to you. There is no other truth. It is autobiographically true, yet every time I am telling you about Kaspars Irbe, I am lying, as I have to keep thinking about my goal. Which aspect of his life do I want to highlight? In the play I focused on sexuality. Kaspars is a homosexual. Male homosexuality in Latvia was a criminal offense until 1992.<sup>1</sup> For me it was a journey back to a time I can hardly imagine. I got to know people I would have never met any other way.

Can you imagine a situation when a member of your own or opposite sex calls you and asks about your sex life in your youth? That is what a few men experienced when I interviewed them to expand the perception of the world exposed to me by the diaries of Kaspars. A world that existed in the bohemian underground, in the courtyards of Riga, a world supervised by the militia men – the world of the Soviet homosexuals. I interviewed two men who both lived as undercover homosexuals, both of them had encountered the Soviet repressive machine and both of them had adapted to the society which declared their homosexuality illegal. One of them become an agent, the other didn't and was punished.

The diaries of Kaspars hold way more stories than the one about homosexuality in the Soviet Union. There is the story about his house – it is not only shelter but gives the opportunity to earn extra money. It is located in the centre of Jūrmala, a notable resort in the Soviet Union, and during the summer there is a high demand for the tiny rooms. He is concerned about the house in one of the districts of Jūrmala named Dubulti, as his neighbours lose theirs, when block housing is built there in order to accommodate all the vacationers. There is a story here that Kaspars starts to realize only in the 1970s. Story about collective Latvian amnesia, about the holocaust. Before the war Dubulti was a Jewish district. Before the holocaust there was a synagogue across the street from Kaspars' house. Then one day all the Jewish people suddenly disappeared and Kaspars did not write about it. Maybe he was afraid, maybe he did not want to notice. There is a story here about unrequited love. About loneliness. About the system. There is some truth, and some lies in each of these stories. Let's focus on another example for a moment...

Andris Grūtups – Latvian lawyer, a man with a significant role in the restoration of the Republic of Latvia and possibly also in plundering it by helping oligarchs. He wrote an autobiography before committing suicide. The work is called “Catharsis”

---

<sup>1</sup> On 5 February 1992, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia passed a law “On the changes and additions in the Criminal law of Latvia.” They came into effect on 1 March 1992. That is the date from which homosexual contact between men is legal in the territory of Latvia.

(*Katarse*, 2012). At the end of the book Grūtups complains about being scrutinized during the last couple of years by several people who were trying to use him in order to gain publicity for themselves. Those people are journalists – one of the journalists mentioned is Jānis Domburs. In the book he is characterized like this: “J. Domburs. He used to run a morally political show on Latvian television. He is capable, but uneducated. He has got some ideas and he is obsessed” [Grūtups 2012: 208].

*Katarse* was a limited-edition book. The person that lent it to me said only 10 to 20 books had been published. Grūtups gave them as gifts to close people and a journalist. All the books have been signed by him. The main theme of the book – I survived and understood the truth of the world. He repeats the phrase *I almost forgot* several times – it has no meaning, as nothing is obviously forgotten – I can see it clearly written on the page – but the autobiography seemingly fuses three-time dimensions. A quote: “Wisdom doesn’t come only from books. Also, from people. People are a real and truthful source of wisdom. It is an inexhaustible source of treasure. For each his own world. Intriguing and unique” [Grūtups 2012: 165]. I used a quote from Grūtups’ book in order to return to Kaspars Irbe and create the background for a quote from his diary in 1940: “The physical body is only a tiny expression of the spiritual world – it is not the essence. It is a small product for the world that revolves around an immortal centre that seeks change and eternal action with a great force. The human soul is a world on its own...” Grūtups is speaking directly – it is exactly what he wanted to say. However, the esoteric sounding banality of Kaspars continues with an unexpected recollection of events: “Elza was sitting down and smoking. The young one started to fool around with the Tall one. He pulled up the skirt and put his hand on the genitalia, he bent down trying to lick it. He supposedly had licked it before. The Tall one was ecstatic, her sublime face seemed enlightened. She had assumed an advantageous pose – her leg was sideways on the highest step. The small one took her again. Then his friend with thick, black hair came up. A very young boy. He finished fast.” Kaspars reveals people in action, even though he is writing this, whilst sitting on his sofa.

At the beginning of the paper I came forward with two ideas: first, the falsity of autobiography comes to light in regard to its audience; second, dramaturgy is always true, as its task is to focus attention. The main goal of dramaturgy is emotions. “*Catharsis*” by Grūtups and the diaries of Kristaps Irbe have very similar themes. By strengthening his character, defying fate, correcting his mistakes, Grūtups has experienced the highest emotional fulfilment, as indicated by the title. His main enemy is himself. He gets drunk and beats influential Soviet officials, hits on hotel administrators, thus endangering his career. His insatiable, unpredictable something that seethes inside... libido? I don’t know. But let’s call it energy – it is the main enemy to a dull and peaceful life.

Energy is pouring out of Kaspars Irbe, too. His sexual escapades lead him to dangerous encounters with strangers in public toilets and parks. And his energy doesn't cease until old age. He learns a lot, he reads everything he can about human sexuality, in order not to be trapped by the system which condemns because his sexuality is illegal. He starts to work in the system as a law enforcement officer to find out how to be a normal Soviet citizen. A lot of KGB agents were recruited after being caught in homosexual acts. Kaspars doesn't fall into the KGB traps. With his romantic affairs Kaspars seeks emotions – love, fear and human connection. Yet his love is dangerous. Kaspars writes diaries to be able to reread them. When he is reading about moments of passion, he has a chance to relive them again and again... because it is not possible any other way. The conditions are not suitable for a real, passionate life. The diaries are full of emotions. I cannot feel them, but Kaspars – as indicated by various underlines and notes – rereads them again and again.

Grūtups, on the other hand, writes an autobiography for those who care about him – to lie that he had a life filled with emotions and true passion. And to prove that suicide was a logical and rational step after experiencing the catharsis of life.

Instead of a conclusion – the synthesis of both ideas. Theatre has the opportunity to replace the autobiographical lies with the dramaturgical ability to show the incessant energy of human life here and now. While autobiography can only imitate energy, life and passion.

### **Sources**

Gricmanis, Matīss (2018). Pilsoņa Kaspara Irbes normālā dzīve. *Theatrical show*. Vilnius: Lithuanian National Drama Theatre.

Gricmanis, Matīss (2017). Būt nacionālistam. *Theatrical show*. [dir.] Valters Silis. Rīga: Dirty Deal Teatro, 2017.

Grūtups, Andris (2012). *Katarse*. Rīga: Atēna.

Lipša, Ineta (2018). Romantisko dēku dienasgrāmata. *Rīgaslaiks.lv*. Available: <https://www.rigaslaiks.lv/zurnals/raksti/romantisko-deku-dienasgramata-19321> (viewed 18.04.2019.)

Zvirbulis, Ģirts (2017). Parādnieks jūtas vīlies savā bijušajā palīgā, kurš uzrakstījis lugu “Būt nacionālistam”. *LA.lv*. Available: <http://www.la.lv/sacimas-deputati-ari-ir-tikai-cilveki> (viewed 22.01.2019.)