



JOURNAL OF THE INSTITUTE OF ARTS AND  
CULTURAL STUDIES, LATVIAN ACADEMY OF CULTURE

# CULTURE CROSSROADS

**VOLUME 30**  
**2025**

# **ACTING. REACTING. ENACTING**

**Theory and practice  
in performing arts research**

**2025**

*Culture Crossroads* is an international peer-reviewed journal published by the Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies of the Latvian Academy of Culture.

## **EDITORIAL TEAM**

### **Guest Editors**

*Dr. art. Līga Ulberte*, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

*Dr. art. Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča*, Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, Latvia

*Dr. art. Zane Radzobe*, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

### **Editor-in-Chief**

*Dr. sc. soc. Anda Laķe*, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

### **Deputy Editor-In-Chief**

*Dr. sc. soc. Ilona Kunda*, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

### **Editorial Assistant**

*Bc.art. Lote Katrīna Cērpa*, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

### **Editorial board**

*Dr. phil. Ivars Bērziņš*, Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia

*Dr. philol. Raimonds Briedis*, Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia

*PhD Simon J. Bronner*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA

*Dr. philol. Valda Čakare*, Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia

*PhD Patrick Collins*, University of Galway, Ireland

*PhD Mairéad Nic Craith*, University of the Highlands and Islands, Scotland

*PhD Nancy Duxbury*, Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra, Portugal

*PhD Marc Jacobs*, University of Antwerp and Free University Brussels, Belgium

*Dr. philol. Benedikts Kalnačs*, Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia, Latvia

*Dr. Tanja Klepacki*, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany

*PhD Ullrich Kockel*, Institute for Northern Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands, Scotland

*Dr. phil. Solveiga Krūmiņa-Konkova*, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Faculty of Humanities, University of Latvia, Latvia

*PhD Egge Kulbok-Lattim*, Tallinn University and University of Tartu, Estonia

*PhD Ellen Loots*, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands

*PhD* **Francisco Martínez**, University of Murcia, Spain

*PhD* **Edwin van Meerkerk**, Radboud University, the Netherlands

*Dr. art.* **Lauma Mellēna – Bartkeviča**, Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, Latvia

*Dr. habil.* **Anna Eстера Mrozewicz**, Lund University, Sweden

*Dr. art.* **Rūta Muktupāvela**, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

*Dr. philol.* **Anita Naciscione**, Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia

*PhD* **Annette Naudin**, Birmingham City University, England

*Dr. art.* **Inga Pērkone-Redoviča**, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

*PhD* **Rita Repsiene**, Lithuanian Culture Research Institute, Lithuania

*Dr. art.* **Inese Sirica**, Art Academy of Latvia, Latvia

*Dr. art.* **Zane Šiliņa**, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

*PhD* **Renata Šukaitytė-Coenen**, Vilnius University, Lithuania

*Dr. art.* **Baiba Tjarve**, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

*Dr. art.* **Līga Ulberte**, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

*Dr. hist., Dr.habil.art.* **Juris Urtāns**, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

*Dr. art.* **Anita Vaivade**, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

*Dr. art.* **Ieva Vītola**, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

*Dr. oec.* **Ieva Zemīte**, Latvian Academy of Culture, Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies, Latvia

Publisher: The Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies of the Latvian Academy of Culture

The journal has been prepared for publication at the University of Latvia Press

Literary editor and proofreader: Margarita Spirida

Layout: Andra Liepiņa

© Latvian Academy of Culture, 2025

ISSN 2500-9974

## CONTENTS

Preface .....	6
<b>SECTION I: RETHINKING ACTING AND PERFORMANCE THEORIES</b>	
<b>Ramunė Balevičiūtė</b> (Lithuania) How Could Artistic Research Contribute to Acting Theories? .....	10
<b>Rūta Mažeikienė</b> (Lithuania) Rethinking Acting in Contemporary Theatre: The Paradox of Contemporary Actor .....	21
<b>Jurgita Staniškytė</b> (Lithuania) Enacting, Not-Acting, Post-Acting: Embodied Life Stories on Contemporary Lithuanian Theatre Stage .....	33
<b>SECTION II: PERFORMANCE AND POLITICS: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES</b>	
<b>Sanita Duka</b> (Latvia) Acting on the Scene of Political Theatre: Leftist Drama Studios in Riga 1920–1930 .....	48
<b>Zane Radzobe</b> (Latvia) Simply Entertainment? Conspiracy Theories and Post-truth in Contemporary Comedy .....	64
<b>Darija Davidović</b> (Austria / Switzerland) Enacting “Real People’s” Experiences of War .....	76
<b>SECTION III: FRAMEWORKS OF PERFORMANCE: INSTITUTIONS, DISCOURSES, TRANSITION</b>	
<b>Vēsma Lēvalde, Sigita Ignatjeva</b> (Latvia) Theatre Management and Performance in the Regions of Latvia .....	90
<b>Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča</b> (Latvia) Research Challenges Concerning the Late 20th-Century Arts in Latvia: Context for Music Theatre Studies .....	100

## PREFACE

The special issue of *Culture Crossroads* dedicated to the performing arts brings together a collection of research articles inspired by the conference “Acting, Reacting, Enacting. Theory and Practice in Performing Arts” held in Riga in 2023 during the Baltic Drama Forum. These selected contributions critically examine evolving paradigms in theatre practice, theory, and infrastructure across multiple cultural contexts. They span a wide thematic scope – from artistic research to postdramatic performance, from historical legacies of political theatre to institutional and research challenges in post-Soviet and contemporary settings, mainly focusing on Baltic theatre space.

The structure of this issue follows the conceptual framework outlined in the conference call—*acting, reacting, enacting*—progressing from theoretical reconsiderations of acting to the socio-political dimensions of performance, and finally to institutional and historiographic perspectives, thereby reflecting the broad spectrum of inquiry envisioned by the gathering.

The opening section is dedicated to the ongoing redefinition of what it means to “act” in contemporary theatre. Ramunė Balevičiūtė’s article, “**How Could Artistic Research Contribute to Acting Theories?**”, serves as a conceptual cornerstone for this discussion. Drawing on her experience supervising artistic doctoral research, Balevičiūtė explores how artistic research—rooted in embodied, tacit knowledge—can contribute to a more holistic understanding of acting. By proposing a hybrid model that fuses artistic and scholarly paradigms, the paper challenges the traditional separation between theory and practice and offers a robust framework for the integration of experimental methodologies into the study of performance. The essay “**Rethinking Acting in Contemporary Theatre: The Paradox of the Contemporary Actor**” by Rūta Mažeikienė furthers this inquiry by revisiting Denis Diderot’s classic *Paradox of the Actor* and examining its resonance in contemporary Lithuanian theatre. Through two case studies—Bernard-Marie Koltès’ *Roberto Zucco* and the postdramatic *Lokis*—the researcher investigates the dissolution of stable character and the implications for actorly presence and audience engagement. The contemporary actor, the author suggests, navigates a paradox not between emotion and technique, but between representation and presence. Jurgita Staniškytė’s contribution, “**Enacting, Not-Acting, Post-Acting: Embodied Life Stories on Contemporary Lithuanian Theatre Stage,**” examines

the increasing presence of non-professional performers and autobiographical narratives in Lithuanian productions. She provides a nuanced exploration of “post-acting,” where the performer’s body becomes a site of both personal history and socio-cultural critique. The paper expands on theoretical traditions stemming from poststructuralism and performativity to frame the shift from dramatic role to embodied testimony, highlighting new tensions between authenticity and construction.

The second section shifts focus to the explicitly political dimensions of theatre, both historical and contemporary. In **“Acting on the Scene of Political Theatre: Leftist Drama Studios in Riga 1920–1930,”** Sanita Duka offers a historical-critical analysis of early 20th-century Latvian leftist theatre. She traces the ideological and aesthetic divergences between radical and centrist socialist theatre practices, with a focus on institutions such as the Riga People’s High School Drama Studio and the Workers’ Theatre. The study emphasises the role of participatory and devised methods in shaping Latvian theatre’s political aesthetics and links these to broader transnational currents, including Soviet agitprop and German political theatre. The article **“Simply Entertainment? Conspiracy Theories and Post-truth in Contemporary Comedy”** by Zane Radzobe explores how Latvian commercial theatre engages with contemporary conspiracy discourses. Through detailed case studies of recent performances (*The Last Straw*, *Don Quixote of an Apartment Building*, *Operation Mindfuck*), the paper argues that comedy in the post-truth era functions as both entertainment and ideological reflection. It draws attention to how theatrical humour can reinforce or disrupt audience biases, revealing the political work of laughter in a fragmented media landscape. Darija Davidovič’s study, **“Enacting ‘Real People’s’ Experiences of War”** focuses on documentary theatre and the use of non-professional actors performing their own wartime testimonies. Set against the backdrop of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, *Exodus* exemplifies a Theatre of the Real, where the line between testimony, performance, and political action is blurred. Combining empirical interviews with hermeneutic analysis, the article reveals how such performances not only convey trauma but also activate ethical spectatorship and community engagement.

And last but not least, the final section addresses structural and historiographic questions surrounding theatre institutions and their role in shaping cultural memory. **“Theatre Management and Performance in the Regions of Latvia”** co-written by Vēsma Lēvalde and Sigita Ignatjeva, investigates the organisational models of regional theatres in Liepāja and Daugavpils. By comparing a municipally managed and a state-administered theatre, the article reveals how institutional frameworks affect artistic output, financial stability, and long-term strategic planning. It challenges the binary of centre vs. periphery and foregrounds the need for equitable

cultural policy that supports regional diversity. Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča, in her reflective essay **“Research Challenges Concerning the Late 20th-Century Arts in Latvia: Context for Music Theatre Studies,”** discusses the historiographical and epistemological problems faced when researching the late Soviet and transitional periods. Focusing on music and opera, the author articulates the tensions between memory, ideology, and methodological responsibility in postcolonial academic scholarship. By invoking the concept of “coloniality of knowledge,” the article encourages a more self-aware and critically engaged approach to Baltic cultural historiography.

In bringing together these diverse yet interconnected contributions, this issue of *Culture Crossroads* aims to both document and provoke. Whether by interrogating the epistemological foundations of acting, reassessing the sociopolitical functions of theatre, or exposing the institutional forces that shape cultural production, these articles collectively argue for a theatre studies that is both rigorously theoretical and deeply engaged with lived realities.

We thank the contributing authors for their thoughtful scholarship, and are grateful to the peer reviewers as well as the editorial team for their dedication. It is our hope that this collection will foster further critical dialogue across disciplines, generations, and geographies.

Editors

**Līga Ulberte,**

**Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča,**

**Zane Radzobe**



**SECTION I:**

**RETHINKING ACTING AND PERFORMANCE THEORIES**

## HOW COULD ARTISTIC RESEARCH CONTRIBUTE TO ACTING THEORIES?

**Ramunė Balevičiūtė**, PhD

*Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, Lithuania*

### Abstract

Drawing upon her insights as an active participant in artistic research processes, the author delves into artistic research practices and seeks to reveal the peculiarities of this research paradigm. By studying examples from artistic doctoral projects, the author explores how artistic research methodologies serve as the lens for unravelling the intricacies of acting, while also acknowledging their limitations. The study argues that neither artists nor art scholars working in isolation can develop a comprehensive theory of acting that fully captures the essence of the phenomenon. Instead, it is through the integration of artistic, scholarly, and scientific paradigms, facilitating the exchange between inside and outside positions, that the complexity of contemporary acting can be illuminated. This synthesis potentially offers new insights into performing arts and paves the way for advancements in both academic research and artistic practice.

**Keywords:** *acting, artistic research, art research, theory, performance*

Upon closer inspection of recent literature on acting, we would see that many of the books were written by theatre practitioners holding a PhD in the arts or humanities. The papers by Rhonda Blair (2007), Rick Kemp (2012), Phillipp B. Zarrilli (2019), Kris Salata (2021), Royce Sparks (2022), and Giuliano Campo (2022), among others, serve as examples. Some of them have or had

a connection to academia, but institutional affiliation is not a prerequisite for carrying out artistic research. It can take place outside the academic realm if it creates new knowledge in and through artistic practice. What kind of knowledge does artistic research produce? This type of knowledge differs from explicit knowledge that is transparently expressed and readily conveyed through language. Artistic research generates implicit knowledge that is tacit, embodied and situated. Typically, this knowledge is non-verbal, context-specific and based on personal experience, intuition, or practical skills.

This paper seeks to reveal the potential of artistic research in shaping acting theories. The author, a theatre scholar and a supervisor of artistic doctoral students, explores the opportunities and limitations of artistic and scholarly approaches to acting and searches for the most relevant model for research on acting.

### On methodology of artistic research

In his book, *The Creative Qualitative Researcher. Writing That Makes Readers Want to Read*, Ronald J. Pelias does not refer specifically to artistic research, but introduces the phenomenon that is very close to it: that is the concept of creative scholarship and creative researchers who pay special attention to the emotional and intellectual complexity of their subjects and who utilize their vulnerable, relational, and reflexive selves to reveal and transform problematic cultural practices, as well as those who involve their embodied ideological and ethical sensitivities in their research endeavours [Pelias 2019]. In contemporary academia, this trend is symptomatic of blurring boundaries between academic and artistic research. However, there are some differences that sometimes can become the strengths and sometimes – the limitations.

Typically, artistic research aims to create something new rather than to explain what already exists. Artistic research stems from artistic practice, but not every practice is research. The distinctive feature of research is the presence of a question that must be answered by implementing artistic practices (often experimental). Its novelty, however, is ensured by the originality of the research method, which is never prepared in advance. The method is being born along with the practice. *The Routledge International Handbook of Practice-Based Research*, and specifically its chapters addressing methodological questions, discusses the distinction across methods and proposes the Common Ground model for practice-based research design. The contributors suggest that in a specific research context, concrete research actions, such as the selection of procedures, tools, and techniques, intertwine with the overall research strategy [Vear 2021: 12].

Juha Varto, the author of the study on artistic research, claims that only research itself can ground concrete selected methods [Varto 2022: 34] and that

artistic research requires a researcher to devise their own method, suitable only for that particular research [Ibid., 37]. According to Mika Hannula et al., the basic scheme of artistic research method can be formulated as follows: “artistic research = artistic process (acts inside the practice) + arguing for a point of view (contextual, interpretative, conceptual, narrative work)” [Hannula et al. 2014: 15].

In devising artistic research methodologies, artist-researchers often borrow methods from other disciplines. One of the most prevalent methods is autoethnography, since personal experience is at the very core of artistic research. Autoethnography provides researchers with an exceptional opportunity to combine their personal experiences, cultural context and artistic practice in an introspective and self-reflective manner. A researcher uses their own experience and a personal life story to contextualise certain cultural phenomena. Hence, autoethnography, being a qualitative research method, can expand sociological understanding [Sparkes 2000: 21]. In artistic research, autoethnography enables actors to explore their personal experiences within the context of acting. It may be relevant when addressing certain topics because this method may yield insights into how one’s own life and identity intersect with their experiences as performers. Moreover, autoethnography may encourage actors to examine their own assumptions, biases, and beliefs critically. This can help the performer to better understand their motivations, goals, and artistic development. Likewise, autoethnography may help actors situate their experiences within broader cultural and societal contexts as well as theatre traditions. Ultimately, by reflecting on their own experiences as actors, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of various creative processes, such as the embodiment of characters, the impact of selected creative models and rehearsal methods, struggles when adopting certain techniques, and others. Given my experience as a supervisor, actor-researchers do not adhere to autoethnography’s methodological approach with precision and consistency, but rather develop their own hybrid method.

Even if we acknowledge the unique nature of knowledge produced by artistic research, the question of how subjective experience can become knowledge remains. The phenomenological position, which equates experience and knowledge, seems not to be sufficient here, because knowledge must be applicable in one or another way. Outcomes of some projects suggest that artistic research produces new meanings rather than new knowledge. Ian Watson proposes the term *applications*: “Unlike scientific research, which is grounded in the discovery of universals, performance research is rooted in the personal, in the findings of individual actors and/or researchers in particular circumstances which are, in turn, applied in future situations” [Watson 2009: 85]. The applicability of new knowledge is more evident when the artist’s research concerns the elements of her profession (techniques,

methods, strategies, etc). In this case, this is knowledge “how to do things”<sup>1</sup>. However, it is not so easily defined when the artist investigates other phenomena (it can be any concept from any field). Many artist-researchers are interested in “the epistemic potential of performing”: they believe that they “can acquire cultural and social knowledge and learn about humankind through a systematic creative and researching artistic process” [Lüneburg 2021: 186].

Two doctoral artistic projects implemented at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre demonstrate how performers integrate autoethnographic elements to develop experimental models suggesting transformational practices for contemporary performers.

The first example is drawn from the work of transdisciplinary performer Brigita Bublytė, who has defended her doctoral artistic project *Transformations of the Vocal Timbre: The Influence of Ethnic Traditions’ Practice on the Contemporary Performer* [Bublytė 2018]. She aimed to reveal how engagement with various ethnic traditions benefits contemporary performers. She practised singing techniques from different ethnic groups (Spanish flamenco, Mongolian throat singing, and Lithuanian sutartinės) and documented the footprint this practice left in her body and its impact on her vocal expression. Having implemented the research project, Bublytė concluded that the practice of ethnic singing affords a performer greater breadth of vocal expression in a number of ways and proposed a set of exercises to aid performers in the process of vocal timbre transformation.

The second example is the project by playwright, director and performer Milda Al-Slamah. In her doctoral artistic project *Overcoming the Constraints of an Independent Theatre Maker: Towards the Theatre of Consciousness* [Al-Slamah 2024], the researcher reflected on her attempts to break free from the constraints that encourage insincere, self-censored, and innovation-lacking expression, and aimed to formulate new creative principles. She documented the changes in her professional and personal mindset while describing her individual journey through testing various creative practices. Al-Slamah ended up in the new territory of the *Theatre of Consciousness* that she proposed as a tool for conscious and live creation with transformative potential.

In both cases, researchers constructed their own method, which was not strictly defined in advance. The research process followed a cyclical pattern: the phase of practical experimentation was followed by a withdrawal from

---

<sup>1</sup> Alva Noë was among the first philosophers to defend *knowing how* as an independent and specific kind of knowledge. According to him, our practical abilities, that play a significant role in the process of achieving this kind of knowledge, are *embodied* (they depend on our bodily natures, moreover, learning new tasks changes our bodies) and *situated* (they have conditions for their exercise that are external to the agent). See: Balevičiūtė, 2018.

the practice and a critical reflection, which involved reading various sources, analysing works of other artists etc. Afterwards, the artists would return to their studios and begin working practically again, attempting to incorporate the newly acquired knowledge. The periods of *doing* and *reflecting* may differ in duration and intensity; however, the general cyclical pattern, offering the shift in perspective on the researched problem, stimulates the researcher's creativity<sup>2</sup>. Within this particular methodological framework, researchers improvise, adapting to new information, exploring different possibilities, and allowing themselves to indulge in the unknown. Since predictability is not the goal in artistic research, artists often employ improvisatory modes of investigation that allow approaching a problem with a flexible and spontaneous mindset and being open to unexpected outcomes. According to Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, "Improvisatory modes of inquiry allow (...) to explore open spaces where the unplanned and unexpected are central to the research process" [Bartleet 2002: 138]. The improvisatory method is particularly relevant to artistic research because it is "both intuitive and based on shared understandings of artistic language, contexts, and relationships" [Ibid].

Bublytė and Al-Slamah relied on their personal experience and on the individual responses to the performed actions in their bodies as well as the mindset assuming that those changes may also occur in the professional life of other performers. Obviously, it is only an assumption and by no means can be considered as a theory. Although the research conducted both by Bublytė and Al-Slamah had the key elements of theory formation, i.e. it involved observation, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, it was based purely on the subjective experience and did not go through testing and refinement in other contexts.

### Artistic vs scholarly theories of acting

When speaking about theories of acting, we usually refer to such prominent theatre directors as Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Brecht, Grotowski, Barba, Lecoq, Brook, Lupa, Fabre, etc. All of them wrote about their methodologies and described the principles of acting. However, basically they were interested in only one particular type of theatre and they sought to train the actor who would be able to embody their theatrical vision. Of course, they considered the latest findings of the sciences of their time (some of them did this more consistently, while others relied more on metaphors and intuition); however, their goal was not to formulate the general principles of acting. In this respect, their theories can be called artistic. Gőze Saner calls such theories *practitioners' theories* and observes that "Theories in the shape of

---

<sup>2</sup> The change of perspective can be seen as an important factor for artists' creativity. See more: Balevičiūtė, Jurgaitytė-Avižinienė, 2002.

methods, sets of principles, rules and value schemes often emerge out of laboratory processes and help formulate and formalize the practice of the specific practitioner/laboratory for posterity” [Saner 2018: 191].

It is noteworthy that all the authors of those acting theories are directors, not actors (although some of them had certain experience in acting practice), and some of the more recent theories are formulated by famous actors’ trainers such as Phillip B. Zarrilli or Rick Kemp. This observation supports my central argument, that theory, specifically acting theory, emerges from the integration of experience (position of an insider) and reflection and conceptualisation (position of an outsider/observer). In the field of performing arts, the centrality of the body is evident. Considering the fundamental premise that “the body is a site of knowledge” [Bartlett 2002: 139], it is necessary to involve bodily experiences of the performers in the analysis of acting. Thus, the directors are very close to the bodily experiences of the actors, but at the same time they keep the critical distance. According to Juha Varto, theory is the detachment from experience, hence it is instrumental in the comprehension of the phenomenon that is being researched [Varto 2022: 88]. This model, combining the alternation of *inside* and *outside* positions, reflects the structure of the artistic research process. Thus, all artistic theories of acting can be seen as the outcomes of artistic research. Although the texts written by artists may look abstract or too poetic sometimes, they are of great value. My practical observation suggests that when artists start working with the phenomena described by artist-researchers in their books, they realise what the author of those hazy ideas wanted to express. This possibly can be explained by the tacitness of knowledge: the knowledge stays silent or incomprehensible until it becomes embodied and situated.

The main difference between artistic and academic research, along with the type of knowledge they produce, is the researcher’s relationship with the object of research. For a long time, the dominant tradition in art research was the investigation of art results (artworks) or the creative process. In both cases, research is conducted outside artistic practice, and the researcher applies various scientific research methods that emphasise objectivity. This means that those methods establish a research object and seek a neutral relationship with it. The researcher observes, analyses, and synthesises phenomena, thereby creating new knowledge. There is a certain difference between scientific (accumulative) and scholarly (diversifying) knowledge, but both kinds of knowledge seek to understand and analyse laws and principles of a concrete phenomenon. In the centre of artistic research, there is the artist themselves – their practice and experiences. Hence, the research object is within artistic practice, and the relationship between a researcher and a research object is subjective and even intimate. The knowledge produced by artistic research is often treated as emergent



knowledge, referring to new, evolving, or cutting-edge information and insights emerging across various fields.

John Lutterbie, the author of the book *Toward a General Theory of Acting, Cognitive Science and Performance*, gives an excellent insight into the differences between artistic and scholarly approaches to art. All scholarly theories must be falsifiable: “The greater the number of experiments that successfully support a truth claim, the more confident scientists are that it can be used as a basis for further explorations. It is humbling to think how much confidence theatre practitioners have in their approaches to creating a performance and how little evidence, other than personal experience, supports that confidence” [Lutterbie 2011: 74].

For artists, Grounded Theory (GT) can offer a relevant scholarly methodological approach. Grounded Theory is a qualitative research methodology developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s [Glaser, Strauss 1967]. Scholars from diverse fields (primarily the social sciences) use this tool to systematically develop new theories from data without fitting the data into preconceived frameworks. According to psychologist Agnė Jurgaitytė-Avižinienė, Grounded Theory is particularly suitable in the fields that have been poorly investigated before, for researching processes or phenomena in the given environment and analysing data collected through interviews, focus groups, observation, diaries, activity notes, and documents, and presented in various forms [Jurgaitytė-Avižinienė 2012: 105]. Jurgaitytė-Avižinienė emphasises Glaser’s and Strauss’s claim that the researcher does not have to be an outstanding scholar or a genius to create a new theory – it is enough to follow strictly the procedures of GT, trying not to get lost in the labyrinths of data [Ibid. 108].

In the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, GT was used by actress Vesta Rasa Grabškaitė in her doctoral research project *Acting Phenomenon: Persuasiveness of the Other’s Verisimilitude* [Grabškaitė 2024]. She aimed to research the complex nature of acting by applying GT to artistic practice. The research was centred on the experience of professional Lithuanian actors to determine the structure, composition, and characteristics of the components of acting and their interactions when seeking to create an impression and impact on spectators. Besides, she created the performance with highly experienced Lithuanian actress Eglė Mikulionytė, where they tested various assumptions about acting. The main research finding is that acting, being an emergent, impact-generating system, requiring anticipatory, adaptive and dynamic properties, obeys three fundamental laws: the law of the other (acting is conditioned by the transformation of the person), the law of the verisimilitude (acting is based on credibility), and the law of the persuasiveness (acting aims at a specifically defined, predetermined, purposely planned, and domain-specific effect). Although Grabškaitė provided many valuable insights into the ontological



nature of acting, at times, she treated the procedures of GT too loosely, beginning to interpret the data at too early a stage. At some points in her research, she mixed GT with performative writing and poetic inquiry that is at the very core of her artistic nature. As a result, her theory of acting cannot be considered a scholarly theory and ought to be allocated to the domain of artistic theories.

The presented cases lead to the conclusion that, in the field of art, the combination of different approaches may serve more than one specific method in seeking to reveal such a complex phenomenon as acting. Of course, many artist-researchers passionately defend their right to autonomy in the research realm. For example, Bartleet states that non-linear, improvisatory, and embodied approaches enable one “to work within research paradigms that respond to the dynamics of the artistic process and the ebb and flow of creative life, rather than pre-ordained, linear prescriptions modelled on social-scientific research approaches” [Bartleet, 2002: 139]. Moreover, many researchers underline “the price of reductionism and generalization” [Hansen 2018: 37] while carrying out scientific or scholarly research in the field of performing arts, because often it fails to reveal the full complexity of an artistic phenomenon. Lutterbie also writes about the limits of science: “While the theatre seeks to expand our understanding of the vicissitudes of human experience, scientists seek to remove all variables that could cast doubt on the conclusions they draw from experiments. For them, being reductive is a virtue. For artists, it is synonymous with being overly simplistic, verging on the boring. (...) The arts tend to expand, the sciences to limit the field of investigation” [Lutterbie 2011: 73–74].

This kind of opposition can hardly be productive. In his research, Lutterbie himself tries to maintain some variables, paying special attention to the insights and testimonies of theatre artists (from Stanislavski to Lecoq). Applying Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) and recent findings in the cognitive sciences, he proposes the *General Theory of Acting*. He suggests looking at acting as a Dynamic System: “Acting is the activity of an embodied, dynamic system”<sup>3</sup> [Lutterbie 2011: 25]. However, at the end of his study, he self-ironically recognises the limitation of his approach:

“Is dynamic systems theory the answer to understanding acting? Ha! Wouldn’t that be wonderful! I have no such illusions. Tomorrow or the next day, experiments may be undertaken that falsify all the claims in support of this model. Such is the nature of science and of theories in general. But for all its frailties, DST does have the virtue of allowing us to rethink the art of acting in a way that, despite the use of science, does not destroy its mystery. It opens up the complexities of

---

<sup>3</sup> ...“dynamic system” is one that exists in a constant state of disequilibrium, responding to perturbations (disturbances) that further destabilize the whole [Lutterbie 2011: 25].

the art form in a way that is comprehensible, accessible, and productive for theatre artists.” [Lutterbie 2011: 231]

In conclusion, the exploration of artistic versus scholarly theories of acting highlights significant differences in their approaches. The artistic theories rooted in practical experience contrast with scholarly theories that emphasise objectivity and systematic analysis, sometimes at the expense of the complexities inherent in artistic practice. The example of Vesta Rasa Grabštaitė’s use of Grounded Theory demonstrates how artistic research can inform structured theoretical frameworks, while also revealing the challenges of balancing creativity with academic rigour. This tension suggests that both artistic and scholarly methodologies are necessary to fully capture the multifaceted nature of acting.

## Conclusions

It becomes evident that neither theatre scholars nor artists alone hold exclusive authority over the development of comprehensive theories of acting, as each approach has inherent restrictions and limitations. Artists often ground their insights merely in practical experience, providing embodied understanding, while scholars tend to prioritise objectivity and theoretical frameworks that seek to distil complex phenomena into generalised principles. This study reveals that artistic research can significantly contribute to the formation of acting theories by leveraging unique insights derived from its distinctive methodology, often employing improvisatory modes. Artistic research fosters a synergistic approach by facilitating an interchange between subjective, lived experiences and analytical, reflective insights. Such integration allows for a more nuanced understanding of how contextual factors, personal experiences, and embodied practices shape the performance process.

The examples of Brigita Bublytė and Milda Al-Slamah illustrate specific ways in which artistic research may contribute to acting theories. Their methodologies, rooted in personal and artistic experiences, inform theoretical discussions by demonstrating how individual practices can give rise to new concepts in acting. Furthermore, the cyclical nature of their research processes, characterised by experimentation, reflection, and integration, highlights how artistic research not only generates new knowledge but also refines and expands existing theoretical frameworks. This iterative approach underscores that acting theories can evolve through the synthesis of insights from artistic inquiry, effectively bridging the gap between practice and theory.

Ultimately, fostering a dialogue between artistic and scholarly approaches can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of acting. By valuing insights from both realms, we can enhance the development of theories that genuinely reflect the richness and complexity of human expression in theatre.

## Sources

- Al-Slamah, M. (2024). *Overcoming the Constraints of an Independent Theatre Maker: Towards the Theatre of Consciousness*. Vilnius: Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. Available: <https://talpykla.elaba.lt/elaba-fedora/objects/elaba:196242190/datastreams/MAIN/content>
- Balevičiūtė, R., Jurgaitytė-Avižinienė, A. (2022). Theater artists between the city and the non-city: the spring of withdrawals and returns. *Culture Crossroads*. No. 21, pp. 79–90. <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol21.273>
- Balevičiūtė, R. (2018). Artistic research as a quest of the new knowledge. On practice-based research in acting. In: Oana Andreica, Alin Olteanu (eds.). *Readings in Humanities*. Cham: Springer, pp. 131–142. Available: [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-66914-4\\_9](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-66914-4_9)
- Blair, R. (2007). *The Actor, Image, and Action: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience*. New York: Routledge.
- Bartleet, B.-L. (2002). Artistic Autoethnography. Exploring the Interface Between Autoethnography and Artistic Research. In: T. E. Adams, S. H. Jones and C. Ellis (eds.). *Handbook of Autoethnography*. New York: Routledge, pp. 133–145.
- Bublytė, B. (2018). *Transformations of the Vocal Timbre: The Influence of Ethnic Traditions' Practice on the Contemporary Performer*. Vilnius: Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. Available: <https://gs.elaba.lt/object/elaba:32685419/>
- Campo, G. (2022). *Acting the Essence: The Performer's Work on the Self*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Glaser, B. G., Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. London: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Grabštaitė, V. R. (2024). *Acting Phenomenon: Persuasiveness of the Other's Verisimilitude*. Vilnius: Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. Available: [https://lmta.lvb.lt/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=ELABAETD196160926&context=L&vid=LMTA&lang=lt\\_LT&search\\_scope=LMTA&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default\\_tab&query=any,contains,grab%C5%Altait%C4%97&offset=0](https://lmta.lvb.lt/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=ELABAETD196160926&context=L&vid=LMTA&lang=lt_LT&search_scope=LMTA&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,grab%C5%Altait%C4%97&offset=0)
- Hansen, P. (2018). Research-Based Practice: Facilitating Transfer Across Artistic, Scholarly, and Scientific Inquiries. In: A. Arlander, B. Barton, M. Dreyer-Lude, and B. Spatz (eds.). *Performance as Research: Knowledge, Methods, Impact*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 32–49.
- Hannula, M., Suoranta, J., Vadén, T. (2014). *Artistic Research Methodology. Narrative, Power and the Public*. New York: Peter Lang, 2014.
- Jurgaitytė-Avižinienė, A. (2012). Ką turėtų žinoti psichologas prieš naudodamas grindžiamąją teoriją savo tyrimuose. *Psichologija*, No. 45, pp. 103–115. Available: <https://www.zurnalai.vu.lt/psichologija/article/view/1534/917>

- Kemp, R. (2012). *Embodied Acting: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lüneburg, B. (2021). Worldmaking – Knowing through Performing. In: A. Huber, D. Ingrisch, T. Kaufmann, J. Kretz, G. Schröder, T. Zembylas (eds.). *Knowing in Performing – Artistic Research in Music and the Performing Arts*. Bielefeld: Verlag, pp. 185–200.
- Lutterbie, J. (2011). *Toward a General Theory of Acting. Cognitive Science and Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pelias, R. J. (2019). *The Creative Qualitative Researcher. Writing That Makes Readers Want to Read*. New York: Routledge.
- Salata, K. (2021). *Acting after Grotowski: Theatre's Carnal Prayer*. New York: Routledge.
- Saner, G. (2018). Containers of practice. Would you step into my shell? In: A. Arlander, B. Barton, M. Dreyer-Lude, and B. Spatz (eds.). *Performance as Research: Knowledge, Methods, Impact*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 185–207.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2020). Autoethnography: Accept, revise, reject? An evaluative self reflects. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, No. 12 (2), pp. 289–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2020.1732453>
- Sparks, R. (2022). *Meisner and Mindfulness: Authentic and Truthful Solutions for the Challenges of Modern Acting*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Varto, J. (2022). *Meninis tyrimas. Kas tai? Kas jį atlieka ir kodėl?* Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla.
- Vear, C. (ed.). (2021). *The Routledge International Handbook of Practice-Based Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Watson I. (2009). An Actor Prepares: Performance as Research (PAR) in the Theatre. In: S. H. Riley, L. Hunter (eds.). *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research: Scholarly Acts and Creative Cartographies*. London: Palgrave, p. 84–90.
- Zarrilli, P. B. (2019). *(toward) a phenomenology of acting*. New York: Routledge.

## RETHINKING ACTING IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE: THE PARADOX OF CONTEMPORARY ACTOR

Prof. Dr. **Rūta Mažeikienė**

*Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania*

### Abstract

Contemporary theatre is characterised by a wide range of acting forms, which encourages a rethinking of traditional notions of acting and the exploration of new methods for evaluating an actor's work. Traditionally, acting has been understood as the art of representing a fictional character on stage through movement, gesture, and intonation. Therefore, the questions posed in Denis Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor*, which explore the actor – character relationship, have long been central to evaluating actors' work.

However, contemporary theatre increasingly features productions in which the actor does not represent the other, performing instead without the pretence of being one of the fictional *dramatis personae*. Even when an actor does represent a dramatic character, certain roles can appear confusing and ambiguous when viewed through the lens of traditional concepts of acting. For instance, this occurs when an actor portrays a fragmented, unstable character lacking social and psychological characterisation, or when an actor integrates multiple fictional characters into a single role.

By engaging with contemporary acting theory and analysing two case studies from contemporary Lithuanian theatre, this article addresses the paradox faced by contemporary actors.

**Keywords:** *acting, performing, role, actor, character*

---

*Culture Crossroads*

Volume 30, 2025, doi <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol30.525>

© Latvian Academy of Culture, Rūta Mažeikienė

All Rights Reserved.

ISSN: 2500-9974



## Introduction

The constantly evolving landscape of contemporary theatre, characterised by its experimental and diverse creative approaches, redefines the role of the actor and fosters pluralistic and innovative modes of artistic expression. As theatre scholar Patrice Pavis observes, contemporary theatre audiences “experience the actor in different ways, much richer than before” [Pavis 2014: 6]. According to Pavis, “actors are no longer only interpreters of text”; they have become “responsible for a new experience of the spectator, for new ways of looking at a text, of producing different interpretations, or simply enjoying theatre in another way”. The proliferation of acting forms and the expansion of the actor’s functions not only necessitate reconsidering the traditional notion of acting but also call for new approaches to evaluating the actor’s art.

Traditionally, acting has been understood as the art of representing a character on stage through voice intonation, physical movement, and gestures. Therefore, the questions raised by Denis Diderot in his famous *Paradox of the Actor* (*Paradoxe sur le comédien*) [Diderot 1994: 100–158] regarding acting technique and the differences between actors who “play from the heart” and those who “act from a head” [Diderot 1994: 103] have long been relevant to the evaluation of an actor’s work.

In *Paradox of the Actor*, Denis Diderot investigates the nature of acting, discusses the significance of mind and emotions in the creative process, and examines the differences between emotional and rational approaches to acting. In doing so, he raises the question of whether great actors genuinely experience the emotions they display during performances, or whether their expressive and emotionally affecting acting results from the masterful technique of imitation.

Diderot’s famous argument is that great actors are excellent imitators and do not need to feel the emotions themselves to portray them convincingly on stage. He argues that acting is an art – where, according to Diderot, the great actor is even more important than the poet – that relies on imitation, skill and control rather than genuine emotional experience. According to Diderot, actors must control their gestures, facial expressions, and voice to convey emotions effectively, without needing to genuinely experience those emotions themselves. Moreover, actors who “act from a head” will “always be the same, unchanged from one performance to the next, always with the same degree of perfection: everything has been measured, thought out, learnt and organised in his head; there’s no monotony, nothing out of place in his delivery” [Diderot 1994: 103]. Therefore, the paradox of the actor, Diderot claims, is that an audience is most affected by an actor who remains emotionally unaffected: “Actors impress the public not when they are furious but when they act fury well” [Diderot 1994: 157].

Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor* has significantly influenced the theory and practice of acting and has been extensively studied and discussed by theatre scholars and practitioners. Almost all major modern theories of acting have repeatedly revisited the question of whether an actor should create a role through emotional involvement and empathy, or remain a detached "imitator", accurately portraying the image of the dramatic character for the audience – "a mirror, always ready to picture things and to picture them with the same accuracy, the same power and the same truth" [Diderot 1994: 104].

The questions raised in Diderot's theory about the most effective acting techniques for creating convincing characters and emotionally impacting the audience remain pertinent in contemporary theatre, especially in drama-centric practices where actors primarily develop their roles from dramatic texts, and acting continues to be understood as the art of portraying a dramatic character. And yet, in contemporary theatre, we increasingly encounter performances where acting is no longer perceived as the representation of a dramatic character, and, according to theatre theorist Elinor Fuchs, we witness "the death of the character" [Fuchs 1996]<sup>1</sup>.

Elinor Fuchs applies the concept of "the death of the character" to contemporary theatre productions that "leave the dramatic mode behind", embrace "non-linear narrative structures", and shift the focus away from individual characters [Fuchs 1996: 106]. Thus, this concept signifies a departure from established dramaturgical and theatrical conventions, including the presence of predictable, figuratively represented characters on stage.

In contemporary theatre practice, "the death of the character" can be associated with both postmodern drama, which features undefined and fragmented characters open to multiple interpretations, and multifocal, non-linear (or *postdramatic* as Hans-Thies Lehmann calls them) performances, in which, as Elinor Fuchs notes, "the human figure is no longer the single, perspectival "point" of stage performance" [Fuchs 1996: 12]. In both postmodern drama and postdramatic performance, the phenomenon of "the death of the character" significantly impacts the work of actors, forcing them to move beyond traditional character acting and explore innovative creative techniques.

Based on two cases from contemporary Lithuanian theatre, this article examines acting in theatre that experiences "the death of the character" and

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this article does not address various non-acting or post-acting forms associated with such contemporary theatre practices as documentary theatre, community-based theatre, participatory performance, site-specific theatre, immersive theatre, socially engaged performance, etc. Rather it focuses on contemporary performances created by professional theatre directors and actors in traditional drama theaters that radically disrupt established acting traditions and enter the realm of postmodern or postdramatic theatre.



attempts to answer the question: What is the paradox for the contemporary actor? The cases are two performances staged at the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre in Vilnius. The first, *Roberto Zucco* by French playwright Bernard-Marie Koltès, directed by Oskaras Koršunovas in 1998, is one of the earliest postmodern drama productions in Lithuania. The second, *Lokis*, by playwright Anka Herbut, directed by Łukasz Twarkowski in 2017, is one of the most prominent recent examples of postdramatic performance. Both productions received exceptional attention from audiences and critics, not only for their innovative dramaturgical languages and directorial approaches but also for their unconventional acting, which challenged traditional methods of character creation. An analysis of the actor's work in these productions reveals a significant shift in acting over the last two decades, influenced by "the death of the character", which manifests in both postmodern drama and postdramatic directing.

### ***Roberto Zucco*: Playing the Fragmented and Intangible Character**

"Koltès's protagonists are not characters in the conventional sense, concrete beings engaged in dramatic situations; they are logical abstractions (...)." [Pavis 1992: 100]

Oskaras Koršunovas's production *Roberto Zucco*<sup>2</sup> stood out in the context of Lithuanian theatre at the time not only because of the Bernard-Marie Koltès' play's drastic and shocking content and its atypical "street anti-heroes" – figures representing the fringes of society – but also due to its innovative directorial language. Koršunovas sought to create a performance that, in his words, would create "the inadequacy between a word and an action, a word and a view" as well as "the collision of action and text" [Koršunovas 1998]. The result, as critics noted, was that communication with the audience relied less on narrative or character development and more "on musical and scenic rhythm, visual changes, dynamics (following the montage principle of the performance), atmospheric shifts" [Daunytė 1999: 41]. *Roberto Zucco*'s staging not only encouraged the audience to perceive and interpret the theatrical action in creative ways, but also inspired new approaches to acting. Reviews of this performance highlighted that Koršunovas's *mise-en-scène* provoked such a mode of acting that "had nothing in common with native psychological theatre traditions" [Gedgaudas 1998] and that "balanced on the edge of naturalism and pure aesthetics" [Vasinauskaitė 1998].

---

<sup>2</sup> For additional information about the production, see: Teatrotekos svetainė; <https://www.okt.lt/en/plays/roberto-zucco-2/>



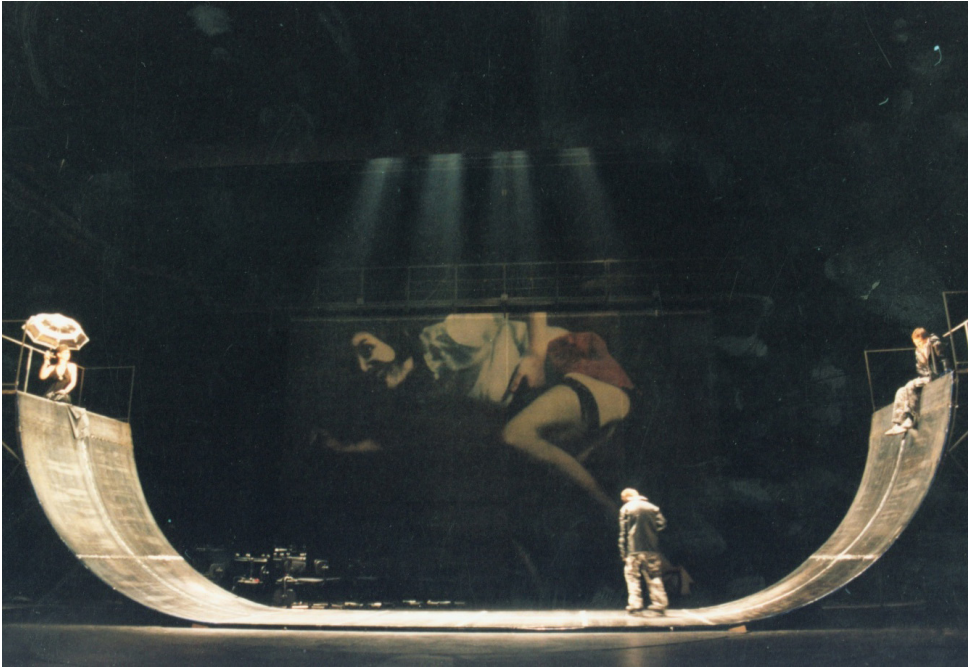


Figure 1. *Roberto Zucco*, directed by Oskaras Koršunovas, 1998,  
Lithuanian National Drama Theatre  
(Photo: Dmitrijus Matvejevas. Courtesy of the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre)

In their analysis of *Roberto Zucco*, critics identified significant changes in acting: a departure from traditional psychological acting, an unstable relationship between actor and character, and a shift from traditional character playing to physical acting and performing, where the body became a primary means of expression. However, critics associated these changes more with the innovative directing of Oskaras Koršunovas than with the postmodern dramatic language of Bernard-Marie Koltès. Nevertheless, it is clear that the changes in acting in this production were strongly influenced by the specific characteristics of the postmodern drama – namely, its rejection of the linear narrative and its fragmented characters.

Postmodern drama erases the identity of the character, retaining only the most basic traits and presenting a fragmented outline of the personage. This outline may either stand out or fade, depending on the reader's ability to connect the fragments into a relatively stable portrait of the character. Perceiving and capturing the essence of such a character is not only complicated but almost impossible. The character is constantly changing, revealing new facets of its identity and clearly demonstrating that the self is merely a repertoire of various, more or less significant roles [Mažeikienė 2008: 165–166].

The unstable and ever-changing characters of postmodern drama challenge traditional acting techniques and encourage a fragmented style that forces actors to perform individual episodes of a role while disregarding the psychological continuity of the characters. Therefore, when portraying a postmodern character, the actor's focus shifts from developing a coherent theatrical persona to embodying a series of actions and moments that, despite their separation, are interconnected within the larger *mise-en-scène*. It can be argued that the fragmented identity of postmodern dramatic characters results in a *decentered* acting style, which is more accurately understood not as character creation but as the assembly and montage of a polyphonic role text.

This approach to acting is exemplified by the performance of the actor Saulius Mykolaitis as the main character Roberto Zucco. In B. M. Koltès's play, the character of Roberto Zucco is deliberately left undefined: he lacks clear physical and psychological characteristics, a consistent personality, explicit motivations, and clearly defined relationships with other characters. As stated by director Oskaras Koršunovas, the primary objective for the actor was to create a theatrical representation of Roberto Zucco that would preserve the character's inherent ambiguity, rendering him "intangible" and "invisible" [Koršunovas 1998]. This was achieved by constructing a role that combined disparate elements and integrated a variety of expressive techniques, both realistic and abstract, as well as verbal and physical.

In some scenes, the actor performed on behalf of the character, thereby emphasising the referential function of his actions. In contrast, in other scenes, the actor concentrated on physical movements as part of the staged performance text, where the performative function of his actions predominated. In this way, Saulius Mykolaitis's acting encompassed both the representation of a dramatic character and engagement in pure performing, wherein the actor's movement, gesture, or posture could be understood as conveying independent meaning within the performance text.

A compelling illustration of this approach to acting is the "Killing of a Mother" scene, which is staged with remarkable effectiveness. Although the audience sees the inscription "Killing of a Mother" projected on a screen hanging in the depths of the stage, no actions explicitly simulating murder take place. During a brief monologue ("Did I give birth to you, Roberto?"), the mother (played by Eglė Mikulionytė) climbs onto the back of her lying son and kneels. Meanwhile, Roberto Zucco (played by Saulius Mykolaitis) crawls across the stage, dragging the mother, who is curled up on his back like a snail. As the monologue progresses, the Mother's voice fades; her breathing becomes heavier and more laboured until she stiffens and falls off her son's back. This way Roberto Zucco "does not kill, but just gets out and



Figure 2. *Roberto Zucco*, directed by Oskaras Koršunovas, 1998,  
Lithuanian National Drama Theatre. On the right:

Roberto Zucco – actor Saulius Mykolaitis

(Photo: Dmitrijus Matvejevas. Courtesy of the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre)

leaves her like an empty stiff shell” [Koršunovas 1998]. The *mise-en-scène* of this episode frames and constrains the actor’s individual expression, encouraging him not to “act” the killing but to perform the physical score with precision. The scene’s final meaning arises from the interplay of its individual elements – visual, physical, verbal, and aural – and depends on the audience to assemble these fragments into a cohesive whole.

The postmodern nature of the dramatic character and Koršunovas’ *mise-en-scène* led Saulius Mykolaitis to adopt a style of acting that can be described as an intermediate state between acting and non-acting. For much of the performance, the actor seems to be merely “being” and “performing” on stage, rather than “acting” or “playing the character”. The fact that the audience sees not the actor Saulius Mykolaitis, but the character Roberto Zucco, is less a consequence of the actor’s identification with the character than a result of the overall theatrical situation, which encourages the audience to perceive the actor’s actions as those of the character. One could argue that the postmodern dramatic persona allows the actor to focus less on building a character and more on performing the precise score of the role. Thus, in portraying a postmodern dramatic character who lacks

clear physical, psychological, and social characteristics, the actor does not need to construct a fully rounded character but rather to provide references that enable the audience to assemble the final image of the theatrical character for themselves.

### ***Lokis*: Performing multiple characters**

“The actor of postdramatic theatre is often no longer the actor of a role but a performer offering his/her presence on stage for contemplation” [Lehmann, 2006: 135].

The dramaturgy of performance *Lokis*<sup>3</sup> freely intertwines three stories, allowing for an exploration of human complexity, the relationship between humanity and bestiality, and the intersection of creation and death. These stories include the novella *The Bear* by French writer Prosper Mérimée (set in Lithuania) and the controversial, tragic life stories of two artists: Vitas Luckus, Lithuanian experimental photographer, and Bertrand Cantat, the lead singer of the French rock band *Noir Désir* (with a focus on the tragic incident in which he killed his partner, the renowned French actress Marie Trintignant, in Vilnius). By creatively interpreting these stories, the creators of the performance (playwright Anka Herbut and director Łukasz Twarkowski) not only explore the liminal states of the human being but also the liminal states of performance itself. *Lokis* blurs the boundaries between theatre, cinema, dance and performance art, between acting and non-acting, between various forms of media and artistic expression, thus entering the realm of postdramatic theatre, where, according to Hans-Thies Lehmann, dramatic text is “merely a component with equal rights in a gestic, musical, visual, etc., total composition” [Lehmann, 2006: 46].

Reviewing the performance *Lokis*, theatre critic Andrius Jevsejevas noted that ““*Lokis*” felt like a gust of freshness and modernity, a feeling I did not have since “Roberto Zucco” by Oskaras Koršunovas” [Jevsejevas 2017]. According to the critic, ““*Lokis*” has shown how powerful and dynamic postdramatic expression can be when the written text is deemphasized, when it no longer is the primary means of developing a narrative, and becomes equivalent to other means of theatrical communication, to other elements of directorial and dramaturgical expression” [Jevsejevas 2017].

*Lokis* fits naturally within the framework of postdramatic theatre, which rejects traditional dramatic conventions in favour of emphasising the spatial and visual dimensions of theatrical action. This production lacks a gradually unfolding plot, clearly defined characters, and a coherent development of scenic events within

---

<sup>3</sup> For additional information about the production, see: [https://www.teatras.lt/en/productions/anka\\_herbut\\_lokis\\_director\\_-\\_lukasz\\_twarkowski/](https://www.teatras.lt/en/productions/anka_herbut_lokis_director_-_lukasz_twarkowski/)





Figure 3. *Lokis*, directed by Łukasz Twarkowski, 2017,  
Lithuanian National Drama Theatre (Photo: Dmitrijus Matvejevas.  
Courtesy of the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre)

a consistent space and time. The traditional linear structure of theatrical action is replaced by a complex audiovisual text that emphasises the spatial relationships between individual scenic elements and their continuous transformations. By separating and juxtaposing text, imagery, movement, and sound, and by manipulating and reconfiguring these elements, the creators construct a multifocal multimedia performance that complicates the act of viewing and perception. Consequently, in this production, the audience's attention is drawn not so much to the story or characters, but rather to the multiple actions within a constantly shifting theatrical landscape. As theatre critic Dovilė Statkevičienė observed, "Twarkowski focuses not on creating a plot, but on creating a universe of images", "we can finally discuss theatre as states, as structures of scenic dynamics, as stage landscapes" [Statkevičienė 2017].

The recurring term "stage landscape" in reviews of this performance invites us to revisit Elinor Fuchs [1996], who has extensively analysed the concept of performance as a theatrical landscape. According to Fuchs, in such postmodern performances, "which have non-linear spatial structures and are concerned not with individual character or a temporal progression but with a total state or condition", the "human figure, instead of providing perspectival unity to a stage (...) is treated as



Figure 4. *Lokis*, directed by Łukasz Twarkowski, 2017,  
Lithuanian National Drama Theatre

(Photo: Dmitrijus Matvejevas. Courtesy of the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre)

an element in what might be described as a theatrical landscape” [Fuchs 1996: 92]. By conceptualising the performance as a theatrical landscape, the actors (and the characters they create) are no longer regarded as the primary participants in the theatrical action. Lithuanian theatre critics assessing the performance *Lokis* have also noted that all theatrical components are considered equal, positioning the actors as just one part of the whole. As Vaidas Jauniškis [2017] observed, “actors are trying to realise that their role may be just a brushstroke in the corner of the overall picture, but no less accurate and valuable”.

In this performance, the actors face the challenging task of embodying multiple characters from different, intertwining narrative lines. At the beginning of the performance, the actors, lined up in front of the stage in a lit theatre hall, introduce themselves to the audience as if they were members of the international creative team: namely, director Łukasz Twarkowski, costume designer Dovilė Gudačiauskaitė, playwright Anka Herbut, composer Bogumił Misala, scenographer Fabien Lédé, and others. In a non-acting style, they present the performance and its creative process, mentioning the challenges the actors of this production faced when asked “to get rid of every possible actor’s system and build this world on the ruins of

a character or a story". Later, all of these actors appear on stage masterfully embodying several different characters. For instance, Airida Gintautaitė portrays both the actress Marie Trintignant and the assistant director Giedrė Kriaučionytė, while Darius Gumauskas takes on the roles of Bertrand Cantat, Wittembach 1, and set designer Fabien Lédé. However, the overall *mise-en-scène* ensures that the actors do not create the illusion that they are someone other than, for example, actor Darius Gumauskas or actress Airida Gintautaitė. Instead, they function within the performance text as flexible theatrical figures, significant as part of a multidimensional stage discourse. As Statkevičienė noted, "in this universe, the actor is above all a moving figure, defined (...) as a visual body with visual characteristics (...) it doesn't matter whether Darius Gumauskas is Darius Gumauskas, or Bertrand Cantat, or Wittembach 1, or Fabien Lédé: what matters is that he is" [Statkevičienė 2017].

One could argue that *Lokis* introduced a completely different approach to the actors' work on stage, allowing them to "exist on stage without playing", to perform without the need for specific character portrayal. Such a way of acting enabled the actors to seamlessly weave together different episodes, words and actions from various characters, freely balancing between acting and non-acting, acting for both the stage and the camera, and navigating between representing and performing. Thus, in this production, to paraphrase Patrice Pavis [Pavis 1996: 59], the actors do not merely *simulate* being someone else; instead, they *stimulate* the audience's reaction, encouraging spectators to interpret their roles both as audiovisual elements within the theatrical landscape and as distinct theatrical characters.

## Conclusions

Contemporary theatre practice demonstrates that actors are increasingly tasked with the creation of roles that do not have a clear prototype in the literary text. Traditionally, role creation has been understood as the process of transferring a dramatic character from the medium of verbal language into physical space (from text to body). However, more recently, role creation is increasingly seen as a multifaceted performance by the actor, without the need to hide behind a fictional character. This shift makes Diderot's question – whether the actor should experience the character's emotions or merely demonstrate them skilfully to the audience – less and less relevant. In the face of the so-called "death of the character", it is not the techniques of character creation that are central to acting, but rather the actor's performative presence during the performance, their existence on stage, even without conventional acting.

Returning to the question of what constitutes the paradox of the contemporary actor, one could argue that it lies in the fact that actors are increasingly encouraged not to play a specific character or even not to act in the traditional sense at all.

In the light of this change, Pavis proposes to “de-dramatize” the role of the actor and to acknowledge that the actor’s role “is only a part of the theatre performance: it takes its meaning from the whole performance, both from the view of the production (as a semiotic structure) and from the point of view of reception (as a construction through the spectator’s viewpoint)” [Pavis 2014: 10].

Thus, the paradox of the contemporary actor emerges from the collaborative nature of meaning-making in contemporary theatre, with the realisation that the character is not solely crafted by the actor but is significantly shaped by the spectator. The final image of the character crystallises in the audience’s mind.

### Sources

- Daunytė, I. (1999). Naujoji komunikacija ieško vartotojų. *Teatras*. No. 2, pp. 38–43.
- Diderot, D. (1994). The Paradox of the Actor. In: Diderot D. *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Bremner. London: Penguin Books, pp. 100–158.
- Fuchs, E. (1996). *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theatre after Modernism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Gedgaudas, V. (1998). Šimtmečio pabaigos autsaideriai nesulaukia atomazgos. *Lietuvos aidas*, November 13, p. 13.
- Jauniškis, V. (2017). *Vakarelis teatro kėdėje*. Available: <https://menufaktura.lt/recenzija/vakarelis-teatro-kedeje/> (viewed 12.06.2024)
- Jevsejevas, A. (2017). *How the form becomes content*. Available: [https://www.teatras.lt/en/productions/anka\\_herbut\\_lokis\\_director\\_-\\_lukasz\\_twarkowski/](https://www.teatras.lt/en/productions/anka_herbut_lokis_director_-_lukasz_twarkowski/) (viewed 14.06.2024)
- Koršunovas, O. (1998). Nematomas tarp nematomų Zucco. Interviewed by Rasa Vasinauskaitė. *7 meno dienos*. 20 February, p. 6.
- Lehmann, H.-T. (2006). *Postdramatic Theatre*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Mažeikienė, R. (2008). Fragmentuota tapatybė: personažo krizė šiua laikiniame dramos teatre. *Meno istorija ir kritika*. No 4, pp. 163–170.
- Pavis, P. (2014). A Few Improvised and Provisory Thoughts on Acting Today. In: R. Balevičiūtė (ed.). *Acting Reconsidered: New Approaches to Actor’s Work*. Vilnius: LMTA, pp. 5–11.
- Pavis, P. (1996). *L’analyse des spectacles: théâtre, mime, danse, danse-théâtre, cinéma*. Paris, Nathan.
- Pavis, P. (1992). *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Statkevičienė, D. (2017). *Šokantys lokio kūnai*. Available: <https://menufaktura.lt/recenzija/sokantys-lokio-kunai/> (viewed 14.06.2024)
- Vasinauskaitė, R. (1998). Nešaukite į Zucco. *7 meno dienos*. 23 January, p. 4.



## ENACTING, NOT-ACTING, POST-ACTING: EMBODIED LIFE STORIES ON CONTEMPORARY LITHUANIAN THEATRE STAGE

Prof. **Jurgita Staniškytė**, PhD  
*Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania*

### Abstract

In the context of contemporary Lithuanian theatre, the most notable manifestations of the evolving dynamics between performer and role may be observed in the emergence of experience-based performances and embodied life stories. In recent years, a number of performances focusing on first-person narratives, often represented by non-actors, have emerged on the Lithuanian theatre stage. Performances based on first-person narratives and embodied life stories prompt spectators to engage with a particular mode of experiencing reality. The presence on stage of the very subjects of the narrated life stories intensifies the demand for authentic presence. Furthermore, it inevitably gives rise to questions concerning the nature of the relationship between reality and acting in the context of contemporary theatre. Using examples from recent Lithuanian theatre productions, this article analyses the emerging new ways of acting or embodying meanings, their underlying principles, historical development, and broader cultural implications.

**Keywords:** *acting, embodied life stories, Lithuanian theatre, performance, reality theatre*

In contemporary theatre, the changes brought about by the so called “performative turn” have led to a changing approach towards actor’s body and identity and have stimulated theatre makers to look for the new ways of embodying as well as communicating meanings. The performative turn has not only reframed

---

*Culture Crossroads*

Volume 30, 2025, doi <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol30.524>

© Latvian Academy of Culture, Jurgita Staniškytė

All Rights Reserved.

ISSN: 2500-9974



the notion of acting as a means of articulating an authentic self, but it has also served to complicate the conventional understandings of what constitutes reality and authenticity within the context of theatre.

On the one hand, there is a visible tendency in contemporary theatre that strives to create an environment for experiencing the effect of authenticity, where one can indeed experience reality or encounter the real, no longer available for us in “society of spectacle”, with abundance of social roles, political stagings, public spectacles and mediating frames of the digital. According to Daniel Schulze, the increasing popularity of one-on-one performances – one of the strands of the fast-growing field of “Reality theatre” – can be interpreted as “an expression of a shared need for intimacy” [Schulze 2017:105]. On the other hand, theatre discourse is still heavily influenced by the notion of acting as something artificial, repetitive, hypocritical and indeed theatrical, wherefore various forms of participatory or engaging performance, documentary or site-specific theatre, experience based or confessional performance point directly to the sphere of post-acting, with the reality effect as its central attraction.

In the context of contemporary Lithuanian theatre, the most notable manifestations of the evolving dynamics between performer and role can be observed in the emergence of experience-based performances and embodied life-stories. In recent years, a number of performances focusing on first-person narratives, often represented by non-actors, have emerged on the Lithuanian theatre stage. Performances based on first-person narratives and embodied life stories prompt spectators to engage with a particular mode of experiencing reality. The presence on stage of the very subjects of the narrated life stories intensifies the demand for authentic presence. Furthermore, it inevitably gives rise to questions concerning the nature of the relationship between reality and acting in the context of contemporary theatre.

Using examples from recent Lithuanian theatre productions, this article analyses the emerging new ways of acting or embodying meanings, their underlying principles, historical development, and broader cultural implications. Drawing on performance theory, the article also attempts to identify aesthetic strategies and discuss key issues that emerge in performances that use first-person narratives and embodied life stories on stage.



At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, poststructuralist theory as well as practices of postmodern and post-dramatic theatre further advanced the perception of the performative body. As a result, the body of actor became not only a means

of expression or embodiment of the fictional other – character – but also socially, historically or culturally conditioned locus of meaning.

The concept of social role and performative presentation of self were the important concepts behind these transformations. As Erving Goffman, one of the most prominent theorists of social role, argued, social identity, in other words, the presentation of the self in everyday life, is shaped by theatrical means [Goffman 1990]. According to Goffman, our behaviour in the presence of others is always performed as a role and is characterised by certain modes of theatrical presentation – role-building techniques, scenery, dramaturgy, staging and props. When an individual is in front of others, they are consciously or unconsciously projecting a specific situation, the most important part of which is the performative construction of the concept of the self [Goffman 1990].

As a result, in artistic practice the body began to be perceived as an interplay between organic, natural and socio-cultural origins, as well as an interaction between the individual and the cultural context, in other words, the body came to be interpreted as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Thus, it became apparent, that culturally conditioned body of stage actor inevitably demonstrates, promotes or criticises the models of self-presentation and behaviour that are typical or emerging in a particular society. In other words, the actor's gestures and body movements are not only inscribed with theatrical meanings, controlled by drama text or imagination of stage director, but at the same time also imprinted with socio-cultural meanings that have long been ignored on modern theatre stage.

Another important development was the post-structuralist revision of the concept of representation: Jacques Derrida's notion of the "freeplay of signifiers" as an endless play of signifying systems signalled its autonomy and disrupted the categories of "reality," "representation," or "meaning," focusing instead on the internal inconsistencies, the constructed nature, and the possibility of multiple interpretations of these concepts [Derrida 1978]. After the post-structuralist turn, representation (text, image, or the actor's body) was declared to be an autonomous system that constructs rather than re-creates reality. While the creators of modern theatre and performance art believe that an actor could achieve authentic presence by removing social or representational masks, poststructuralist theories argue that representation is never neutral, it cannot be escaped and that post-representational presence is nothing more than the effect of reality.

Roland Barthes defined the creation of the reality effect as the concealment of the "mediating frame", which metaphorically means representational codes and conventions, in order to make the spectator believe that they are actually witnessing the "faithful image of the world" [Barthes 1974]. Consequently, reality or authenticity onstage are understood not so much as an objective representation

of reality, but rather as the result of the interaction between the scenic image and the mind of the viewer. The idea that systems of signification cannot be perceived as neutral or transparent but are rather constitutive of reality influenced the practice of postmodern theatre, opening it up not only to the critique of “unmediated presence” but also to the investigation of the mechanisms of production of meaning as well as the processes of performance creation and perception.

Consequently, it became apparent that the actor’s body on stage is not only defined by the codes of a particular performance or text but is also always subject to social discourses. However, if modern theatre artists believed that ideological and cultural codes can be neutralised, the postmodern artist is aware that they are forced to work within the codes that define their cultural landscape. Postmodern theatre makers, influenced by poststructuralist theories on the constructed nature of identity and the discursive coding of the body, sought to reflect and expose this condition. In postmodern performances of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the actor’s body was perceived and presented as a historical and cultural construct, postulating its performativity and materiality, as a space in which ideological codes and “inscribed” social meanings were concentrated.

Another important process that took place in postmodern and post-dramatic theatre was the desemiotisation of the actor’s body. According to Hans-Thies Lehmann, post-dramatic theatre was characterised by a self-consistent corporeality, where body of actor does not express certain themes, but rather becomes the theme itself [Lehmann 2006: 95–98]. It manifests itself rather than represents other theatrical means of expression. Actor investigates what it means to be in their body and not to transform it according to the needs/shapes of the character, how these two states are similar and how they differ. In conclusion, postmodern aesthetics brought the understanding of the actor’s body as a “matter” always “inscribed” with cultural meanings, therefore never a “neutral” one.

### **Enacted social roles and non-acting bodies onstage**

The analysis of Lithuanian stage practice of the last decades suggests that the change in the relationship between the actor and the role until 2010 was developing in several directions: the transformation of the locus of the actors body in the hierarchy of formal elements of the performance structure (the relationship between textuality and corporeality in the performance) and the creation of reflexive practices that analyse the relationship between the actor’s identity and the role (as well as fictional and social role). These transformations manifested themselves in such stage practices as self-reflexive acting, deconstruction of the role, and the involvement of the amateur performers, together with the so-called experience-based drama and embodied life stories.

The increasingly frequent appearance on the theatre stage of amateurs or performers who have gained prominence outside the theatrical domain can be interpreted as a performative or physical intertext. Such performers serve at least two functions. Firstly, they broaden the scope of interpretation, given that the very presence of the performer represents the socio-cultural context that has shaped their identity. Secondly, the inclusion of non-professional performers also demonstrates the theatrical nature of identity, thereby indicating that identities are constituted by context. In such performance, the boundary between the 'life' and 'theatre' is always reflected upon, either asserted or demonstratively exposed as fictional. The dynamics of the relationship between social and theatrical identity are brought in the forefront, thereby raising the issue of the interaction between acting (fiction) and being (reality).

Initially, this tendency appeared as isolated fragments in the works of different generations of Lithuanian stage directors. In Eimuntas Nekrošius's interpretation of William Shakespeare's "Othello" (2000), two brothers – characters invented by the director – are performed by non-professional actors Viktoras and Jonas Baubliai. In Bernard Marie Koltes "Roberto Zucco" (1998), directed by Oskaras Koršunovas, Algis Maceina, a notorious city dweller of Vilnius at that time, becomes Galiūnas, a stage signifier of the urban landscape. The performers of Nekrošius's "Hamlet" (1997) and "Othello" (2000), rock singer Andrius Mamontovas (Hamlet) and ballerina Eglė Špokaitė (Desdemona), are clearly different from other actors in the manner of performance; they not only represent the meanings of the play text or the symbolism of the characters, but also gently direct the viewer's interpretation towards other sociocultural contexts – first of all, the "real" identities and social roles of both performers.

Images created by these performers combine a fictional theatrical existence with a socio-cultural identity. While the meanings of these images may conflict, disturb, complicate, or interpret the text of the play, the successful unravelling of all these layers of meaning depends on the spectator. In essence, it represents an endeavour to deconstruct the very nature of the theatrical and to establish an immediate existence on stage that is "untouched" by representation. The second, more characteristic of the postmodern imagination, is the desire to explore the tenuous boundary between public social self (rock star, famous ballet dancer) and the theatrical role.

In other instances, non-professional performers do not assume the role of a character; rather, they simply occupy a position on stage as participants in the theatrical action or as visual figures within a scenic landscape. This approach to acting is closely related to the specific aesthetics of visual or post-dramatic theatre, as exemplified by the work of Robert Wilson and Jan Fabre. In visual theatre, actors perform almost entirely in a way that is referential and almost completely abandon the referential – the very act of representing something else. According to

the iconic acting scheme coined by Michel Kirby, these forms of performance can be attributed to the extreme point of the not-acting vector, which he terms non-matrixed performance [Kirby 1990]. In the visual landscape of performance, actors exist as self-referential signs, referring to no one else but themselves.

Such examples of “not-acting” were quite rare in contemporary Lithuanian theatre. One of the earliest instances of this practice was observed in a dance sequence and performance featuring a skateboarder (L. Kirkilionis) in the 1998 production of “Roberto Zucco,” directed by Koršunovas. The performers did not so much represented fictitious characters as they did present themselves as real bodies on stage. They did, however, occasionally enter the symbolic field of dramatic meanings, as evidenced by the skater who doubled the role of Roberto Zucco. Together with the fictional characters, they enacted their roles within the confines of the contrived stage space, as though they were integral to the contemporary urban landscape. In certain instances, such as the disco scene, they even became the focal point of the visual *mise en scène*.

Almost two decades later similar acting techniques were present in two productions created by Polish theatre artist Lukasz Twarkowski and his team for Lithuanian National Drama Theatre – “Lokis” (playwright Anka Herbut, 2017) and the first immersive and durational performance in Lithuania “Republic” (2020). In Lithuanian theatre context, both productions were exceptional due to their autonomous, self-contained, and detached visuality, fragmented narrative, choreographic ambience, non-acting techniques, heterogeneous structuring of theatrical elements and decentred modelling of the stage space.

### **More than real? Embodied life stories and first-person narratives**

While the examples from the previous section opened up more diverse forms of embodiment of meaning onstage and initiated a trend toward rethinking the relationships between the authentic body, social role, and non-acting in Lithuanian theatre, they still focused on examples of amateur actors creating roles based on plays or being inserted into the fabric of the performance at the will of the director, rather than telling their own stories. However, the last decade has seen a growing number of performances in Lithuanian theatre focusing on first-person narratives or embodied life stories represented by non-actors. Do we really need the mediating presence of professional actors to tell someone’s story? Or perhaps only first-person narratives can ensure authentic experience in the theatre? These questions are coming to the fore in a growing number of the most recent productions of experience-based drama and embodied life stories, which represent a particularly illustrative manifestation of the emerging approach to the relationship between performance and reality in contemporary Lithuanian theatre.

Indeed, embodied life stories and first-person narratives invite the audience to experience a specific effect of reality, since the appearance on stage of the very subjects of the narrated life stories redoubles the urge for authentic presence. This kind of performance tries to escape the criticism that is directed at many documentary or verbatim forms of theatre for performing an “act of ventriloquism”, according to Deidre Heddon [Heddon 2008: 129]. In other words, for irresponsibly manipulating the act of speaking in the name of the other. It can be assumed that the ethical and psychological challenges that documentary or verbatim theatre makers face when attempting to appropriate the stories of others for artistic purposes can be avoided by allowing the real people to perform their own stories onstage.

One of the first in the line of embodied life stories on Lithuanian theatre stage was the production “The Green Meadow” (2017, directed by Jonas Tertelis and Kristina Werner, dramaturgy by Rimantas Ribačiauskas, Lithuanian National Drama Theatre) – a collectively devised performance based on interviews and workshops conducted with current and former workers of the Ignalina nuclear power plant, as well as people involved in negotiating its closure. The so called “everyday experts” [Dresse, Malzacher, Rimini Protokoll 2008] – namely, the local residents of Visaginas and Helene Ryding, an independent energy consultant from the UK recount onstage the stories of their personal accounts of the decommission of the Ignalina nuclear power plant and its subsequent impact on their lives and identities. Interweaving personal experiences, family stories, historical, political and popular discourses, “The Green Meadow” was performed in three languages: Lithuanian, Russian and English, with each person speaking their native tongue.

Real people, not characters embodied by actors, appear on stage in the production “Dreamland” (2017, Artscape, Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, dramaturgy — Rimantas Ribačiauskas, Kristina Savickienė, stage director — Mantas Jančiauskas). Immigrants from the Middle East, Turkey, Afghanistan and Russia living in Lithuania, among them refugees who had sought or been granted asylum, international students as well as economic or love migrants performed their life stories on stage. The performance narratives were based on information derived from a range of sources, including Lithuanian and foreign online articles, political statements, speeches and other material collected during artistic research at the Pabradė Foreigners’ Registration Centre.

Typically, the presentation of embodied life stories and first-person narratives on stage by “real people” prompts the audience to experience a particular effect of reality. The appearance on stage of the very subjects of narrated life stories serves to intensify the demand for authentic presence, which is intrinsic to the essence of any kind of “Reality Theatre”, be it documentary theatre, one-on-one performance, Theatre of Experts (Rimini Protokoll), etc. The creators of “The Green Meadow” and



“Dreamland” also sought to achieve the “reality effect” as one of the primary objectives of their production. According to the creators, the important task of the production “The Green Meadow” was to introduce the audience to a completely real, non-acted person [Ribačiauskas 2018: 11]. As noted by critic Dvilė Statkevičienė in her review of “Dreamland”, “the mere fact that they are telling their stories is enough to hit you over the head” [Statkevičienė 2017].

All of the performances referenced herein have dealt with people and/or social groups (migrants, asylum seekers, ethnic minorities, inmates, taxi drivers, etc.) who are not often represented on the theatre stage or who are on the margins of mainstream theatrical narratives. These protagonists can be described as “cultural strangers”, to use the term coined by Meg Mumford while analysing the works of Rimini Protokoll “as different, foreign, or insufficiently known, due to their occupational, class or ethnic background” [Mumford 2013: 154]. Although the goal of offering a new perspective on the unfamiliar, of giving cultural strangers a voice in the theatrical space, is undoubtedly a new step in Lithuanian theatre, both aesthetically, narratively and ethically, it is important to understand the means by which socio-cultural distances are bridged and “what sort of spectatorial encounters with cultural strangers does these productions facilitate” [Mumford 2013: 154].

Both “The Green Meadow” and “Dreamland” were created using the characteristic elements of reality theatre: the use of direct address, everyday language, proximity to the audience, minimal stage design, and “invisible” stage direction (as Statkevičienė noted in her review of “Dreamland” – “directorial silence” [Statkevičienė 2017]). The performative creation of the effect of authenticity was similar to many contemporary forms of documentary or verbatim theatre – contemporary audiences are already quite familiar with these models of theatrical direction and recognize them by the way the performance is constructed as “true” rather than fictional. However, this promise of truthfulness and unmediated presence was treated uncritically in both productions. On the contrary, the producers seemed to ignore the fact that life stories are the products of creation, constructed to compose a public re-presentation of oneself, involving various aspects of power, ethics and politics.

First, even as theatre takes on lived experience, with its subjects addressing the audience directly, the question of authorial agency remains central. Both performances were clearly playwright-led and director-led productions, with the playwright and director driving the authorial process. Based on material gathered in group sessions, individual interviews, and workshops, the scripts of both productions, although based on lived experience, went through a process of dramatisation and theatrical framing that influenced the effect of the performance. The initial stories were selected, edited, and shaped into relatively



linear narratives that followed the romanticised model of the eternal human quest for self-fulfilment and happiness, rather than revealing the conflicts, social antagonisms, and ideological complexities lurking behind the Chernobyl-style Soviet industrial colonisation project, as in the case of “The Green Meadow,” or the psycho-social realities of migrating subjects in “Dreamland.” As critic Aušra Kaminskaitė noted, the dramaturgy is arranged in such a way that “the chaotic, unconnected narratives are given an orderly structure, as if to deceive the audience that they [performers] are speaking openly on stage” [Kaminskaitė 2018: 60]. Thus, the dramaturgical choices were made by the creators for the performing subjects.

Second, the treatment of socio-cultural difference in artistic practices always produces a specific spectatorial position – critical or empathetic, challenging or reinforcing stereotypes. The representational models of the performance “The Green Meadow” and to some extent “Dreamland” produced an effect of “dramatisation” that was exactly the opposite of the creators’ intentions: instead of authentic narratives, the audience was confronted with stereotypes and an exoticised objectification that reinforced the privileged position of the spectator and at the same time created distance instead of eliminating it. The critic Statkevičienė metaphorically characterised the “encapsulation” of personal experience into coherent narrative structures, almost devoid of antagonisms and ideological complexities in “Dreamland”, as “a glazed form of dramaturgy”, “a blood mist instead of a bloodstream” [Statkevičienė 2017].

What we encountered in these performances was appropriation and re-iteration rather than a critical or self-reflexive investigation of “the ethics and politics of using other people’s lived experience and testimonies to make theatre” [Stuart Fischer 2020: 2]. The performers became protagonists without agency: not given the opportunity to reflect on their role in the structure of the performance, they embodied an imaginary notion of themselves, a creative reconfiguration of their own experience, bereft of conflicts, complexities and contradictions. Paradoxically, “The Green Meadows” and “Dreamland” offered their protagonists the opportunity of becoming actors, an agency of public performance, an opportunity of being in the spotlight rather than an agency of controlling their representation. We were able to get to know not so much the cultural strangers as the creators’ interpretations of them.

Moreover, the performances rejected not only the possibility of critically/self-reflectively assessing the authority of the director/writer, but also of evaluating the privilege of the spectator-subject in relation to the performer, who becomes an exotic object to be observed. This privileged position of the spectator/observer was reinforced by the fixed performance space (traditional theatre stage) and traditional viewing locations – the audience seated in the hall. In this case, the performance

was not framed as a form of dialogue or mutually empowering social exchange, but rather as a pleasurable satisfaction of curiosity.

According to Mumford, in order to achieve a mutually empowering encounter in reality-based theatre, several strategies can be employed, including the disruption of “the viewing and consumption practices that fix marginalised unfamiliar into a place of exclusion and total knowability”, as well as “a spatial and textual play with observer-observed relations and the layering and juxtaposition of fictional and documentary narratives that reveal the audience’s complicity in exclusive practices” [Mumford 2013: 165]. These were precisely the strategies of the other two performances – “TAXIS. Attempts at Covering Distances” and “Guided,” in which non-actors were the embodiments and narrators of their life stories.

The performance “TAXIS. Attempts at Covering Distances” (2021) – a slight modification of one-on-one and first-person narrative performance (stage director Kristina Werner, dramaturgy Rimantas Ribačiauskas, Artscape), took place not on a theatre stage, but in an authentic social environment, directly related to the life stories and their narrators. The stage was a taxi, the set was a city, the actor was a taxi driver, the plot was the interaction between driver and passenger. While this may evoke the typical ambience of a taxi ride, it was, in fact, a distinctive hybrid form of documentary and participatory performance. It offered insight into the world of taxi drivers and their diverse experiences that have become the foundation for the dramaturgical material of “TAXIS”.

According to the creators of performance: “Performance “TAXIS. Attempts at covering distances” was aimed at trying to capture the present, where “the old taxi business is almost extinct, changed by algorithm-controlled transportation platforms, though still alive in the heads of several drivers and their work culture” [Artscape.lt 2021]. The starting point for this performance was the question “Why do you drive a taxi?” posed to a group of taxi drivers, who responded to the authors’ invitation not only to tell their professional stories, but to become their narrators – everyday expert performers. Similar to “The Green Meadow”, the authentic stories of taxi drivers were collected through interviews and workshops, then selected and developed – rewritten – in collaboration with the creative team. However, the stories themselves, although dramaturgically reworked, were not polished into a coherent narrative, they did not avoid fragmentation, antagonisms, uncanny moments, silences, or the play between reality and fiction.

The performance – a fictional but very real taxi journey – begins at the specially constructed call-centre (centriukas) and overseen by a dispatcher, who accidentally assigns routes and drivers to the passengers – the audience. The journeys traverse a multitude of routes, elucidating various aspects of the city from the eyes of the taxi driver. There are certain fictional aspects – theatrical interludes or moments of

artifice in the performance: musical score imbues each journey with a distinctive ambience; visual media art and interactive game elements highlight the interaction between drivers and passengers. The script is open to unscripted improvisations, such as questions from the audience – passengers. The role play and dynamics between observer-observed (performer-perceiver) fluctuates throughout the journey, while both drivers and passengers seem to enjoy this performative “social pleasure ride” on the borders of fiction and everyday-life [Mumford 2013: 161].

“Taxis” acknowledges the performative nature of both the stage and the everyday; theatrical interludes or instances of artifice reinforce moments of reality. The most important aspect of this production is the demolition of the power relationship between the audience and the narrating subjects/performers: sitting in a taxi with an arbitrarily assigned fellow passenger, one is no longer in the privileged position of the observer, but rather in the fluctuating position of being both observer and observed.

Similarly, the project “Guided” (2023) was initiated in 2021 by the authors and the Artscape team through the organisation of workshops at Pravieniškiai Prison (stage director Mantas Jančiauskas, dramaturgy Rimantas Ribačiauskas, Mantas Jančiauskas). In developing a model, the authors describe as a “performative encounter,” Jančiauskas and Ribačiauskas were exploring new forms of coexistence in theatre. They were attempting to create the mechanics of a performance that actively and provocatively, yet safely, involves both convicts and spectators [artscape.lt 2023]. During a performative encounter, 10 convicts and 10 spectators meet for a dialogue in an authentic environment – prison, for which neither side is prepared in advance. The very moment of entering the prison – of passing through the screening, of sitting in front of the convict – is felt on the skin of the participant and radically reverses not only the traditional practices of spectatorship in the theatre but observer/observed relations as well.

Although face-to-face, the meeting is mediated by technology – questions appear on smart screens that act as meta-texts for self-reflective situational assessment. The creators of the performance themselves are critical of the “claim to truth” in the prisoners’ stories or in the answers to questions from both sides. The encounter involves eerie moments of fear, silence, the uncanny, the uncomfortable, but the differences are not glossed over. The one-on-one performance opens up the possibility of dialogue, moments of potential communion and genuine connection that go beyond simple curiosity. As critic Sigita Ivaškaitė writes in her review of the production: ““Guided” does not ask for an acquittal, does not lead to a definitive conclusion. The main instrument of the performance, the dramaturgy, in fact subtly guides, moderates the conversations between two shyly meeting people, so that each round of meetings opens up more and more confidence or at

least freedom (!) to speak. (...) Perhaps this moment becomes the key to answering the inner question: am I behaving like an insensitive tourist in front of those behind bars? At a certain point, we become for them as much exhibits or living moulages, designed to revitalize the skills of everyday communication.” [Ivaškaitė 2024]

These one-to-one encounters (both in “Guided” and “TAXIS”) strived to create a model of dialogue, marking a radical shift from the first-person narratives conveyed on the stage (“The Green Meadow”, “Dreamland”) to the creation of a non-hierarchical communication structure of the performance, in an authentic environment that best opens the space for self-reflexion and dialogue.

## Conclusions

The performative understanding of subjectivity and identity, as an effect created within intersubjective exchange, has had a significant impact on the processes of acting, particularly in relation to the actor and the character, in contemporary Lithuanian theatre. Nevertheless, the resulting willingness to forego the intermediary function of professional actors in order to narrate another’s experience does not necessarily imply a post-representational understanding of the role.

Although all the above-mentioned performances based on embodied life stories share their devising methods with socially engaged ethnography in all of them the notion of authenticity and the pledge of an unmediated presence are treated without critical scrutiny, resulting in challenges that are analogous to those encountered by numerous projects within the domain of “theatre of the real” [Martin 2013]. One particularly salient example of this tendency is the case of “The Green Meadow”, which succumbed to the “myth of authenticity”, eschewing reflexivity regarding the processes of its creation. Despite being gathered from everyday experts during group sessions and based on their direct experiences, the scripts of these performances underwent a process of dramatisation, i.e. were carefully crafted into fixed narratives. The manner of theatrical framing had an impact on the overall effect of this performance as well. The model of narrative construction, coupled with the presence of non-fictional individuals onstage/in their authentic social environment necessitates an affective response rather than a critical or dialogical engagement.

It is beyond doubt that these first-person performances contribute to a greater understanding of the possibilities of acting in contemporary Lithuanian theatre. One potential beneficial consequence of publicly enacting one’s personal narratives is the capacity to exert a particular social influence. In such cases, the ability to speak for themselves without the intermediary presence of professional actors can be a significant practice in taking control of their own narrative. Nevertheless, an uncritical approach to first-person narratives onstage, which portray representations

as neutral and devoid of any conflict, may preclude the possibility of a critical or political perception in such productions.

### Sources

- Barthes, R. (1974). *S / Z. An Essay*, New York: Hill and Wang.
- Derrida, J. (1978). *Writing and Difference*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 278–93.
- Dresse, M., Malzacher F. (2008). *Experts of the Everyday. The Theatre of Rimini Protokoll*. Berlin: Alexander Verlag Berlin.
- Forsyth, A. (2011). *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Goffman, E. (1990). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books.
- Heddon, D. (2008). *Autobiography and Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holdsworth, N., Milling, J., & Nicholson, H. (2017). Theatre, Performance, and the Amateur Turn. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, No. 27 (1), pp. 4–17.
- Jackson, S. (2011). *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. London: Routledge.
- Jola, C., Hansen, P. (2021). Editorial: Performance in Theatre and Everyday Life: Cognitive, Neuronal, and Applied Aspects of Acting. *Frontiers in Psychology*, No. 12, pp. 732233–732233.
- Ivaškaitė, S. (2024). Vieni kitų vedami. Available: <https://menufaktura.lt/recenzija/vieni-kitu-vedami/> (viewed 01.05.2024)
- Kaminskaitė, A. (2017). Jų svajonių Lietuva. *Kultūros barai*, No. 12, pp. 58–61.
- Kirby, M. (1990). *A Formalist Theatre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lehmann, H.-T. (2006). *Postdramatic Theatre*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Martin, C. (2017). Reclaiming the Real: Introduction. *TDR : Drama Review*, No. 61 (4), p. 8.
- Martin, C. (2013). *Theatre of the Real*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mumford, M. (2013). Rimini Protokoll's Reality Theatre and Intercultural Encounter: Towards an Ethical Art of Partial Proximity. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, No. 23 (2), pp. 153–165.
- Ribačiauskas, R. (2018). Kaip rūke suradome sekvoją: spektaklio „Žalia pievelė“ kūrimas. *Teatras*, No. 8, pp. 10–13.
- Snyder-Young, D. (2013). *Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schulze, D. (2017). *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make it Real*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PlcImprint.

- Statkevičienė, D. (2017). Apie grožį: dokumentiniai veidai. Available: <https://menufaktura.lt/recenzija/apie-grozi-dokumentiniai-veidai/>
- Stuart Fisher, A. (2020). *Performing the Testimonial: Rethinking Verbatim Dramaturgies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- TAXIS. Attempts at Covering Distances* (2021). Available: <https://artscape.lt/en/projektas/taxis-attempts-at-covering-distances/> (viewed 01.05.2024)



**SECTION II:**

**PERFORMANCE AND POLITICS: HISTORICAL AND  
CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES**

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

Mg. art. **Sanita Duka**

*Art Academy of Latvia, Latvia*

### 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.

---

*Culture Crossroads*

Volume 30, 2025, doi <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol30.574>

© Latvian Academy of Culture, Sanita Duka

All Rights Reserved.

ISSN: 2500-9974



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.

### Sources

- Aragay, M., Botham, P., Prado-Pérez, J. R. (ed.). (2020). *World Political Theatre and Performance: Theories, Histories, Practices*. Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi.
- Barnett, D. (2015). *Brecht in practice: theatre, theory and performance*. London, New York: Bloomsbury.
- Brecht, B. (2016). *Brecht on theatre*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Brinkmanis, A. (2023). Proletarian Theatre as a Site for Education. Radical Pedagogies of Asja Lācis and Walter Benjamin. *Art and Self-Determination: A Reader*. Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, pp. 64–71.

- Carney, S. (2005). *Brecht and critical theory: dialectics and contemporary aesthetics*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Darba Jaunatne (1933). Virziens uz priekšu! *Darba Jaunatne*, biedrības Darba Jaunatne centrālās valdes izdevums. Nr. 1 (20), 20.01.1933., p. 5.
- Gavars, P. (2014). Sociāldemokrātu un komunistu kopdarbība un savstarpēja politiska cīņa Rīgas Tautas augstskolā (1920–1934). *Latvijas Zinātņu akadēmijas Vēstis*, 68 (3/4), pp. 85–101.
- Hausmanis, V. (2009). Latviešu drāmas sākotne. Rīga: Zinātne.
- Hiss, G. (2005). *Synthetische Visionen: Theater als Gesamtkunstwerk von 1800 bis 2000*. München: Epodium.
- Jākobsons, E. (1931). No studijas līdz teātrim: sakarā ar Strādnieku dramstudijas 10 darba gadiem. *Domas*, Nr. 6, 01.06., pp. 449–454.
- Hagemann, C. (1918). *Regie: die Kunst der szenischen Darstellung*. Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler.
- Kārklīņš, J. (1926). Kā izveidojams Strādnieku teātris Rīgā. *Jaunākās Ziņas*, Nr. 252, 08.11. Available: <https://www.periodika.lv/periodika2-viewer/?lang=fr#issue:627324|article:DIVL213> (viewed 02.12.2024)
- Kleberg, L. (1993). *Theatre as action: Soviet Russian avant-garde aesthetics*. London: Macmillan.
- Kerzhencev, P. [Lebedev P. M] (1923). *Tvorcheskij teatr*. Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo (Керженцев П. М. [Лебедев П. М] (1923) Творческий театр. 5-е изд., пересм. и доп. М: Государственное издательство). Available: [http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/Personal/Kerzhentsev\\_Platon\\_Mihailovich.htm](http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/Personal/Kerzhentsev_Platon_Mihailovich.htm) (viewed 02.12.2024)
- Kosiński, D. (ed.). (2023). *A Lexicon of the Central-Eastern European Interwar Theatre Avant-garde*. Warsaw: Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, Performance Research Books, Aberystwyth.
- Lācis, A. (1921). Jaunie virzieni teātra mākslā. *Kultūras Svētki*, No. 1, 03.06, p. 4. Available: <http://www.periodika.lv/periodika2-viewer/?lang=fr#issue:701406> (viewed 02.12.2024)
- Lācis, A. (1926). Strādnieku teātris pie RABCB kluba. *Jaunā Vienība*, No. 5, 05.03., p. 9–10. Available: <https://www.periodika.lv/periodika2-viewer/?lang=fr#issue:677929> (viewed 02.12.2024)
- Latvju Grāmata (1927). Hronika. *Latvju Grāmata*, No. 6, 01.12., p. 399.
- Leach, R. (2018). English Workers Theatre. *An Illustrated History of British Theatre and Performance*, Vol. 2. London: Routledge.
- Paškeviča, B. (2006). *In der Stadt der Parolen: Asja Lacis, Walter Benjamin und Bertolt Brecht*. Essen: Klartext.

- Plakane, G. (2021). Latvijas Komunistiskās partijas satelītorganizācijas 20. gadsimta 20. gados: Rīgas Arodbiedrību centrālbiroja piemērs (Satellite Organizations of the Latvian Communist Party in the 1920s: Example of Riga Trade Union Central Bureau). *The Scholarly Readings of Young Historians VI* (2021), pp. 45–57. Available: [https://www.apgads.lu.lv/fileadmin/user\\_upload/lu\\_portal/apgads/PDF/Rakstu\\_krajumi/Jauno-vesturnieku-zinatniskie-lasijumi/JVZL6/jvzl.06.03.Plakane.pdf](https://www.apgads.lu.lv/fileadmin/user_upload/lu_portal/apgads/PDF/Rakstu_krajumi/Jauno-vesturnieku-zinatniskie-lasijumi/JVZL6/jvzl.06.03.Plakane.pdf) (viewed 02.12.2024)
- Rudnitsky, K. (1988). *Russian and Soviet theatre, 1905–1932*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Samuel, R., MacColl, E., Cosgrove, S. (1985). *Theatres of the Left, 1880–1935: Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and America*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Stourac, R., McCreery, K. (2024). *Theatre as a Weapon: Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany and Britain, 1917–1934*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Tišheizere, E. (2023). Anna Lācis: A Latvian transit from Russia to Western Europe, translated by Kristina Guste. In: *A Lexicon of the Central-Eastern European Interwar Theatre Avant-garde*. Warsaw: Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, Performance Research Books, Aberystwyth.
- Vanaga, A. (2024). *Viena māja, pieci teātri. Māja ar sešiem gulbjiem*. Rīga: Zaigas Gailis birojs, pp. 19–118.
- Zariņš, J. (1974). *Mans darbs teātrī*. Rīga: Liesma.
- Zelče, V. (2002). *Nezināmā: Latvijas sievietes 19. gadsimta otrajā pusē*. Rīga: Latvijas Arhīvistu biedrība.
- Zeltmatis [Kārklīšs, E.], Lejas-Krūmiņš, T. (1923). *Skatuves māksla*. Rīga: J. Rozes apgāds.

## SIMPLY ENTERTAINMENT? CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND POST-TRUTH IN CONTEMPORARY COMEDY

Dr. art. **Zane Radzobe**

*Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies of Latvian Academy of Culture, Latvia*

### Abstract

The paper concentrates on conspiracy theories as a subject for contemporary comedy. Based on performances by Latvian theatre artists, the author argues that comedies in the post-truth media environment function as a hybrid genre, mixing entertainment and public discourse, fact and fiction. The article concentrates on the strategies used by the performers to influence the discourse of conspiracies and mould their audience's perceptions and beliefs by strengthening their pre-existing biases.

**Keywords:** *comedy, entertainment, conspiracy theories, theatre, post-truth, audience*

In September 2022, the Latvian-based research company SKDS conducted a survey to explore public beliefs in Latvia regarding the existence of a so-called “world government.” According to the survey results, 53% of respondents agreed with the statement “There is a secret organisation or group of people that has influence over all global processes and controls many of the world’s governments.” In contrast, 27% of participants rejected the notion of such an organisation, while 20% expressed uncertainty, selecting the option “it is difficult to say” [Kaktiņš 2022].

Conspiracy theories have increasingly become a focal point of scholarly interest in recent years, particularly in relation to the role of social media, global politics, and the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Identifying theatre as a part

of the media system, this article seeks to explore strategies employed by Latvian theatre-makers when addressing the theme of conspiracy theories. I will concentrate on a case study of three Latvian performances – “The Last Straw”, “Don Quixote of an Apartment Building”, and “Operation Mindfuck” – while examining how entertainment is used to communicate with a broader public of theatre-goers and the effects it can have on audiences. The study uses narrative and semiotic approaches, while also concentrating on the contextual levels of the perception of a performance and argues that in the context of post-truth and hybrid media environment entertainment can become a factor in strengthening shared beliefs in groups of spectators.

Within the disciplines of cultural and communication studies, the cultural landscape evolving in the 21st century is frequently characterised as a “post-truth” regime. The discourse surrounding this subject exposes a growing disillusionment among large segments of global society with the concept of an objective, verifiable reality. It is not that truth is entirely absent, but rather that it is perceived as unattainable and unverifiable, thereby diminishing its practical relevance. In this context, truth is often supplanted by personal beliefs, ideologies, and impressions, that reinforce individuals’ preexisting sense of reality.

Furthermore, the increasing globalisation of politics, economics, and culture has distanced ordinary citizens from the decision-making processes that affect their lives, fostering a sense of powerlessness. This phenomenon is compounded by cognitive biases, such as the tendency to interpret significant events — whether personal or societal — as intentional rather than accidental. The rapid expansion of digital technologies has also created extensive networking opportunities, enabling the proliferation of alternative narratives. As a result, while conspiracy theories have historically occupied a marginal position in society, the 21st century has witnessed a marked surge in their prominence, with these theories increasingly gaining social legitimacy and acceptance [McIntyre 2018].

Conspiracy theories are generally defined by two key components: first, they provide explanations for events or circumstances as the result of a secretive plot by typically powerful conspirators; second, they assert that a significant secret is being deliberately withheld from the public. Culturally, conspiracy theories, especially about race and religion, have been present in the European context; however, in theatre, at least in Latvia, conspiracy theories have never previously been an important subject. In the few cases that could be gathered during the last decades, conspiracies are mostly used as a narrative tool to construct metatheatrical performances utilising mystifications, alternate history narratives, etc. Hence, importantly, post-truth performances dealing with conspiracy theories treat this subject differently.



All the performances discussed here belong to a commercial strand of theatre, and their primary aim is to entertain their public. However, the specific comedies are dependent on semi-documentary inspirations and treat contemporary conspiracy theories (COVID-19, QAnon, and Big Pharma) as belonging to the factual, not fictional reality. This creates an interesting opportunity to reflect on how entertainment functions as an information dissemination tool and whether it offers any critical reflection on controversial subjects. While conspiracy theories are a prominent subject in fields such as media studies, especially in the context of emerging hybrid media environments, they have seldom been explored in theatre practice or theory. It can be noted, for instance, that when addressing themes related to COVID-19, the emphasis in theatre studies is typically on the technical aspects, and theatre is framed as a medium of resilience [Beeler & Beeler 2022; Boland 2020], rather than as a direct commentary on the crisis itself. This can be partially explained by the fact that the focus of theatre studies often excludes mainstream theatre practices that lack artistic excellence or clear social or political significance.

### Case studies

The first Latvian performance to engage with the themes of conspiracy theories and misinformation in the post-COVID environment was *The Last Straw* (*Pēdējais salmiņš*) by Ivo Briedis, directed by Toms Treinis, and premiered at the National Theatre of Latvia in 2019.

On a narrative level, the performance is structured as a dialogue between two opposing worldviews, although in time, the spectator may realise they are not necessarily exclusive. Edvīns, a rational, sceptical man, is married to Marija, who tends to believe in various superstitions. The couple's difficulty conceiving escalates their beliefs, and the conflict mounts when Marija invites a healer Voldemārs Kuzma to live with them.

The male character of Kuzma is played by actress Lāsma Kugrēna and becomes the focal point of the comedy. Kugrēna uses a grotesque manner and crossdressing that in a psychologically realistic performance underscore subversion of conventional notions of "normalcy". It is important to recognise that crossdressing in Latvian culture and in theatre does not have a tradition that the broader public would be familiar with, and on rare occasions when it has been used, it was typically in the context of cruder comedies. Hence, in this case, challenging gender norms also becomes a sign that the subject the character represents, namely the alternative medicine practices, are being ridiculed.

However, this reading of the plot is complicated by two additional aspects of the play. The first one is the fact that Kuzma is based on the real-life figure of Ivan Kuznetsov, a well-known Russian inventor and healer, whose acupuncture mat is

very popular in the region and likely encountered or even used by many members of the audience. Therefore, it could be argued that any ridicule directed at Kuzma, to an extent, could be construed as targeting the audience.

The second aspect is plot-based. As the play progresses, it turns out that Edvīns hosts a television program that promotes alternative medicine. He does not reflect on the contradiction between his personal beliefs and professional role, viewing the latter merely as a means of financial gain. The lack of morals in Edvīns' professional choices is later revealed to be profound when his doctor-friend invites him to switch sides – promote pharmaceuticals, despite their shared scepticism regarding the efficacy of drugs.

Traditional medicine is widespread and culturally accepted in Latvian society, often used to complement Western-style medicine. However, the scepticism towards conventional medicine during the last decade is becoming more widespread, and the plot of Edvīns' career clearly references conspiracy theories recognisable to the audience – namely, so-called 'Big Pharma' and by extension vaccine scepticism.

The reviews indicate that the performance is not necessarily critical of such conspiracies. For example, theatre critic Atis Rozentāls observes that, while Kuzma is a comical character, he is also portrayed as sincere and unwavering in his beliefs, thus evoking audiences' sympathies. In contrast, conventional medicine is presented as an enterprise driven by financial motivations rather than a concern for the welfare of patients. Rozentāls concludes that the juxtaposition of alternative and conventional medicine in the play invites the audience to recognise flaws in both fields but notes that the emotional choice represented in the play is not between truth and falsehood, but rather between "freaks and cynics" [Rozentāls 2019]. Thus, the critic situates the play in the context of post-truth, acknowledging that the "truth" or message of the performance is largely dependent on pre-existing personal beliefs of the audience, and the performance itself is not in fact positioned to offer an opinion either way.

In contrast, "Don Quixote of an Apartment Building" ("Blok mājas dons Kihots") written by Artūrs Dīcis and directed by Gundars Silakaktiņš at the Dailes Theatre in 2020 appears to provide a more structured depiction of conspiracy theories, with reviewers interpreting the narrative as a commentary on mental health issues [Svarinska 2020]. However, a closer examination reveals that the strategies employed in the theatre production exhibit striking similarities to those used in "The Last Straw".

Dīcis is an actor turned contemporary playwright, and he specialises in a style that could be described as a collage of collected texts. Dīcis frequently uses large quantities of slightly modified media and social media quotes to form the body of his plays achieving a sense of contemporary relevance, while also representing on stage

people that are typically marginalised in contemporary Latvian theatre, namely, *petit bourgeois* and their everyday experiences. Due to this, in recent years Dīcis has become a noteworthy contemporary playwright in commercial entertainment theatre relying heavily on his audience's contextual perceptions – ability to identify his plays as “life-like”.

“Don Quixote of an Apartment Building” revolves around a hostage situation. An electrician named Viktors is tasked with entering private flats to check electricity meters, and during this mundane task he encounters a nameless character identifying himself as “the Question Mark” who refuses to let Viktors leave. The Question Mark is a conspiracy theorist, and as he tries to free himself, Viktors gradually becomes ensnared in his world of unconventional beliefs.

The play is staged as a comedy, and much of its comic appeal emerges from Question Mark's bizarre way of connecting unrelated subjects to form an all-encompassing worldview. However, the playwright has described the play as “a contemporary tragedy” rather than a comedy, and the sign system of the play showcases the fluidity of such concepts as “norm” and “abnormal”.

One of the key aspects of critical thinking is a constant analytical re-evaluation of the information and what is considered true in any situation. In “Don Quixote of an Apartment Building” it quickly becomes obvious that the one questioning and re-examining the reality is the conspiracy theorist, while “the normal one” lacks the ability to question his reality or approach it creatively and is dependent on and maintaining a system he does not understand (electrical grid, societal control mechanisms, etc.). The title of the play further underscores this contrast, since Don Quixote, the famous character from Cervantes' novel, is traditionally seen as an idealised figure of a seeker of truth, and it is perhaps a coincidental irony that this attitude is often referenced in journalism as a metaphor for an ideal practitioner in that profession. The reference to an “apartment building” also brings forward the question of agency – is the quest for truth a prerogative of certain privileged groups, for example, and why should others accept this truth without examining it?

The genre difference between the play and the performance raises questions about the intended perception of the piece. The performance uses the metaphor of theatre as a mirror. The performance is being performed outside of the theatre building looking in – the spectators are seated in the Daile Theatre garden, looking in through a glass wall of the theatre's café where the actors are. As the performance ends, the lights dim, and the glass wall takes on a mirror-like quality. However, there is a difference in how a “theatre-mirror” functions in a comedy or in a tragedy. Tragedies deal with larger societal matters and reflect society in a manner that in all seriousness highlights the cause of the problem; comedies on the other hand often concentrate on individual level and use distortions to draw audience's attention to

the subject matter. As Patrice Pavis explains, while tragedy engages with our fears, comedy works to counteract them by providing a shield against them – a comedy presents a distorted version of social realities, often based on misunderstandings or errors, thus allowing spectators to form a distance from the object of ridicule and laugh. [Pavis 2003: 183–184] In comedy, the object of laughter is typically “the other”, and while it does not preclude deeper reflection on the subject or oneself, if the audience perceives the fictional reality of the play as “life-like” and relatable, they are likely to view the character’s search for truth—despite its misguided nature—primarily in a sympathetic light, as a sincere effort to uncover hidden knowledge in an uncertain and deceptive world.

The validity of this interpretation is supported by a spectator review, which the theatre has intriguingly used to promote the performance. Kristaps Baņģis, a well-known activist in the community of alternative knowledge on the social platform *X*, endorses the play: ““The Don Quixote of an Apartment Building” raises a lot of questions that come to mind in this schizophrenic world of (COVID) restrictions (...)” Given the reviewer’s context, the categories of “normal” and “abnormal” in the play are clearly fluid.

This example brings into focus the intricate relationships between the intentions and contexts of the authors of a performance and the positioning of the audience. My last example – “Operation Mindfuck”, created by Yael Ronen and Dimitrij Schaad and directed by Alvis Hermanis at the New Riga Theatre in 2022 – demonstrates just how complicated these relationships are.

Unlike the previous theatre artists, Hermanis is an internationally well-known theatre director of considerable status, who has been working in an *avant-garde* theatre environment for decades. However, his professional stance in recent years has changed, and it affects the reading of this piece.

Hermanis’ international career came to an abrupt halt in 2019, and he sees it as an act of ideologically motivated censorship stemming from his public opposition to European refugee policies. Recently, Hermanis has also been marginalised in Latvian theatre context. His theatre building was under a prolonged renovation, and during this time Hermanis argued that the temporary space of the company was not suited for serious art, but also – that he believed the theatre should become more audience-friendly. This resulted in a repertoire consisting mainly of commercial pieces and comedies, as well as Hermanis’ adopting a more traditional directorial style, often dependent on the text and relatively closed to interpretation. As a result, Hermanis has lost a significant amount of critical acclaim, and this he also identifies as a politically motivated process, believing that critics belong to a radical left-wing conspiracy. What is significant here is that his views are publicly accessible, as Hermanis actively uses *Facebook* as a self-publishing platform and frequently has

his posts reprinted or quoted in sympathetic cultural outlets, as well as on society gossip pages.

This creates an intriguing paradox: while most of Hermanis' recent performances are not explicitly political; they are created by an artist who is known for his outspoken ideological views. Hermanis has also, to some extent, shifted his audience base—while a segment of long-time fans continues to attend his productions, many have been replaced by a new group of individuals who align themselves with the values expressed by the director or his regular social media interlocutors, particularly those with conservative, right-leaning ideologies. For this group, Hermanis has become a figurehead, representing a self-identified marginalised segment of society that feels disconnected from power, both politically and culturally. As I will demonstrate, the impact of the performance is dependent on the group to which the spectators belong.

“Operation Mindfuck” explores various conspiracy theories through a layered narrative. The play itself is a study of the emergence of cults – it concentrates on Discordianism, a religion celebrating chaos that, according to internet sources, was founded in the 1960 as a mock cult but has acquired a sincere following in the 21st century. However, Hermanis presents the play to the audience without any emotional or analytical pointers, almost as a neutral reading of the text. Therefore, the construction of the play text becomes the main source of the meaning.

The first layer centres on the fictionalised creation of a well-known conspiracy theory QAnon. A budding writer lands a job producing clickbait news and quickly learns that the more outlandish the story, the more successful it becomes. The idea is characterised by referencing real-life conspiratorial claims, such as the idea that Finland does not exist or that birds during the COVID-19 pandemic were replaced by surveillance drones. This level clearly identifies conspiracy theories as fabricated and propagated in the media and can be seen as a critical commentary.

The second layer of the performance introduces a political dimension. A lobbyist discovers an unremarkable man with no social media presence, ideological leanings, or talents, and turns him into a successful politician. The political process here is shown through the lens of a puppet-master relationship, creating the sense that the political process is never transparent, and the public does not actually know who governs. This layer is strengthened by a casting choice – the lobbyist is played by a Latvian actor turned populist politician, Artuss Kaimiņš. The play draws on references to the political dynamics of the United States, particularly the rise of Donald Trump, so the inclusion of Kaimiņš effectively localises the play's political critique to Latvia. However, it also evokes a specific kind of watching.

Marvin Carlson has written extensively about the concept of ghosting in theatre – the fact that the audience members actively use their individual memories

of previous stagings, interpretations, castings, company or space contexts etc., and his understanding of how the contexts become visible through the body of the performer also applies here [Carlson 2011: 52–95]. Despite Kaimiņš being an actor many spectators do not primarily perceive him as a character portrayed by a professional, but rather as a politician commenting on a political process. In this way, his presence on stage appears to legitimise what is depicted, as he brings an element of insider knowledge to the performance.

Carlson examines such strategies of perception from a semiotic perspective, suggesting that rational analysis is used to identify the connections between the layers of embedded material. As I will discuss further, theatre however is not necessarily a rational experience for the audience. Therefore, in the context of entertainment, I think Carlson is effectively complemented by McConachie's insights who, while discussing theatre perception in the context of neurology, notes that the processes of conceptual integration (simultaneous perception of character, actor, text, staging, audience, etc.) usually happen with little conscious thought [McConachie 2013: 53]. In addition, for McConachie, this process also involves "absent agents" [ibid.: 55], for example, playwright's or director's intentions; therefore, Hermanis' expressed mistrust of "the establishment" is a factor even if it is not reflected in the performance itself.

The third layer of the production portrays the level of the "masters". A mysterious character is introduced into the plot, and she fluctuates between the roles of a businesswoman running a clickbait operation and of a "deity of chaos". The organisation she leads is described as a force bent on destroying reality and thus awakening humanity spiritually. Ironically, conspiracy theories are characterised on seemingly mutually exclusive levels: after being initially debunked as fabrications, they are nevertheless revealed to be real and threatening. The conspiracy theory theme, especially in social and political environments, appears in the reviews as the central message of the performance – Rozentāls, for example, bases his review around the concept of "manipulation" in society [Rozentāls 2022], while Normunds Akots uses that of "control" [Akots 2022], but to a very similar end.

## Discussion

The performances I have briefly summarised share common characteristics that offer an opportunity to examine similar pieces of contemporary entertainment theatre in a specific context – as a hybrid genre. To summarise – the key similarities include the genre of comedy, the factual inspiration and contemporary references, as well as the relationship between theatre makers and their audiences.

When describing the dramatic form of comedy, Pavis suggests that laughter can serve two primary functions: it can be either participatory or exhibit superiority,



and it also serves as a defence mechanism against tragic emotions [Pavis 2003: 183–184]. He also states that the goal of comedy is to amuse [ibid.: 183], which could be interpreted as the escapist element in the entertainment, and given Pavis' frequent references to Aristotle, it is reasonable to infer that he views the functions of comedy as primarily didactic, entertaining, and therapeutic – helping the audience to overcome their fears or anxieties.

This categorisation summarises well the traditional dramatic form, however, in the contemporary context Pavis' description remains somewhat limited, since it never addresses the contemporary reality: a fragmented society where belief systems reflected in a comedy would seem absurd to some and very serious to others without a clear distinction to which group constitutes “the norm”. But humour is profoundly dependent on cultural context and shared frames of reference [Ödmark 2018: 3], in addition to being influenced by the changing landscape of media, which has also changed the function of entertainment genres in general.

In contrast to theatre studies that are not particularly interested in entertainment, the issue of comedy and its effects is well-researched in the field of media studies – both in discussing media products such as situation comedies, stand-up, late-night comedies, as well as emerging genres, for example, infotainment. For the purposes of this study, it is important to highlight that the dramatic comedies analysed beforehand are created and function much like the products of these genres. All of them rely on a recognisable net of contemporary references that are frequently quoted and then supplemented by artistic distortion, sometimes in the form of a comment, while maintaining that the aim of such communication is no more than entertainment. However, in reality, all are dependent on a spectatorship that shares values and orientations, and thus – the ability to laugh about the same things, and also communicate ideas and attitudes.

When discussing conspiracy theories in the previously mentioned comedy genres, Philip Scepanski notes that conspiracy theories are representative of a populist mistrust of power. As such, they are related to how comedians of marginalised backgrounds perceive and communicate about culture, namely, both comedy and conspiracy theories have served as tools of resistance and protest. [Scepanski 2021: 90] This explains why conspiracy theories tend to emerge among minority communities, since they sometimes are subjects of actual conspiracies and thus prone to be distrustful, as well as draws attention to many conspiracy theories starting out as a joke when conspiracy theorists test their ideas in the “just kidding” mode of humour. [Ibid.: 93]

The shared tactics and approaches did not pose a problem while conspiracy theories remained confined to marginalised groups. However, by the second decade of the 21st century, when they became more widespread, mainstream



media began to take notice, leading to the hybridisation of genres. The process is framed by an attempt to resist the post-truth attitudes, as well as the changes in the media landscape when media consumption has become fragmented, offering each consumer the opportunity to cherry-pick their sources of information. As media researcher Sara Ödmark concludes, it creates opportunities for alternative media actors to be more influential as well as greater incidental exposure to news through other forms of media genres, such as entertainment [Ödmark 2018: 2]. In this new media environment, audiences are not homogeneous – for low news media consumers, contemporary comedy functions as a gateway to the public debate, while for high media consumers it is a complementary text that builds communities and strengthens social bonds [ibid.: 5]. Such communities are often formed around opinion leaders (comedians as celebrities among them), and they influence the news agenda by the way they frame information. [Ibid.: 4]

This is one of the reasons why comedy in certain areas has become more influential, since it is understood as a way of reaching unwilling audiences. Many news outlets use comedic strategies to complement news programs; late-night television in the United States of America during President Trump's first term broke a long-standing tradition of political neutrality and partly converted itself in a political commentary genre, thus stating their moral belief that the truth and facts do exist, etc. However, comedies can be used not only to fight, but also to spread misinformation. "One reason comedy is interesting as a form of social negotiation is that it is in a sense considered "play", which sets it aside from normal discourse. That something is "just a joke" allows for messages and a framework to be presented that in a more serious setting might not have been acceptable," summarises Ödmark. [Ödmark 2018: 5]

Theatre in this new environment becomes a space for the segmented audience to interact. As Ödmark stated, audiences, of course, are not homogeneous; however, the physical coexistence in a shared space has the potential to influence even diverse groups.

When discussing perceptions of theatre, Bruce McConachie focuses on neurological processes. While acknowledging the importance of semiotics in the process of decoding performances, he nevertheless insists that for most spectators, this is not the primary way of experiencing theatre. However, since studies of individual audience members are limited and complex, much of the theory often focuses on the experiences of critics, academics, or spectators trained in specific aesthetics. For him, however, psychological evidence demonstrates that emotional, rather than intellectual involvement is crucial for spectators [McConachie 2013: 57], and it is primarily emotional relationships with characters that form the basis for either "sympathetic or antipathetic responses" [ibid.: 60].

McConachie writes that the enjoyment of a spectator derives from his ability “go with the flow of performance”: “Audience attention in the theatre may be momentarily interrupted, or spectators may choose to stop the “flow” of a performance by un-blending actor/characters to momentarily think about the work of such singular agents as actors, directors, and playwrights. But usually not for long. The pleasurable effects of “flow” generally pull spectators back into cognitive activities of blending and empathizing”. [McConachie 2013: 55–56]

The collective experience of the theatre is a factor, and McConachie talks about enjoyment of “the feeling of togetherness” as being emotionally contagious [McConachie 2013: 69]. Thus, theatre experience can be conceptualised as networking: “Networks are sociological categories, useful for grouping average beliefs and responses but not reliable for determining individual actions. Nonetheless, because we are social animals, we tend to respond within the boundaries of our networks. (...) All performance networks limit the reach of every drama, including the kinds of meanings that spectators within the networks will tend to generate.” [Ibid.: 70]

I believe it is important to note that McConachie’s description is not entirely all-inclusive, as there are types of theatre that specifically require spectators to be active, inquisitive, and capable of subverting the premises presented by a performance. However, it seems that this description demonstrates how audiences typically behave in a commercial entertainment environment, especially – since they have been conditioned to do so by the media environment that utilises these principles regularly.

As McConachie concludes, the meaning of any performance obviously emerges from the interplay among performers, spectators, and other agents in the network. [McConachie 2013: 73] However, it also explains how the emotional and public experiences shape and reinforce beliefs and orientations in audiences, especially as in the performances discussed previously, when theatres avoid a clear stance, allowing the private beliefs of the spectators to fully determine the view on a controversial subject. As stated by Ödmark, framing of the subject becomes an important tool for influencing a discourse.

Whether by design or coincidence these performances normalise conspiracy theories as a form of public discourse in contemporary Latvian society. This strategy, intentional or not, positions the plays as reflective of the broader social climate, where conspiracy theories are no longer merely fringe beliefs but are woven into the fabric of contemporary discourse. The humour in these productions, rather than offering a critical distance from the subject matter, invites the audience to engage with conspiracy theories as a form of reality, reflecting the shifting boundaries of what is considered “normal”.

### Acknowledgments

This research is funded by the Latvian Council of Science, Project “Jeopardizing Democracy through Disinformation and Conspiracies: Reconsidering Experience of Latvia” (No. lzp-2019/1-0278).

### Sources

- Akots, N. (2022). Smieties vai skaidrot? *La.lv*, 10.11.2022. Available: <https://www.la.lv/smieties-vai-skaidrot> (viewed 18.02.2024)
- Beeler, K., Beeler, S. (2022). Going digital in a small city hub: community theatre and dog performance events during lockdown. In: I. Gemmel, J. Wang (eds.). *Creative Relilience and COVID-19: Figuring the Everyday in a Pandemic*. London, New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003213536-15>
- Boland, A. (2020). The Challenges and Surprises of Making Theatre of Zoom. *Rescripted*. Available: <http://rescripted.org/2020/09/01/challenges-zoom-theatre/> (viewed 18.02.2024)
- Carlson, M. (2011). *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Dailes teātris. (2019). Blokmājas dons Kihots. Available: <https://www.dailesteatris.lv/lv/izrades/2019-2020/blokmajas-dons-kihots> (viewed 18.02.2024)
- Kaktiņš, A. [@Arniskaktins] (2022). “Vai pastāv Pasaules valdība – t.i. kāda slepena organizāciju vai cilvēku grupa, kurai ir ietekme uz visiem pasaules procesiem, kura kontrolē daudzu pasaules valstu valdību darbu? 2022.gada septembrī apstiprinoši atbildēja 53%. Tikai 27% uzskatīja, ka tādas nav!”, 01.11.2022. Available: <https://twitter.com/Arniskaktins/status/1587446755511001088>
- McConachie, B. (2013). *Theatre and Mind*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Ödmark, S. (2018). Making news funny: Differences in news framing between journalists and comedians. *Journalism*. No. 22 (6). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918820432>
- Pavis, P. (2003). *Slovarj teatra*. Moskva: Progress.
- Rozentāls, A. (2019). Dīvaiņi pret ciniņiem. *Kultūras Diena*, 06.10.2019. Available: [https://www.diena.lv/raksts/kd/teatris/divaini-pret-cinikiem-izrades-\\_pedejais-salmins\\_-recenzija-14227744](https://www.diena.lv/raksts/kd/teatris/divaini-pret-cinikiem-izrades-_pedejais-salmins_-recenzija-14227744) (viewed 18.02.2024)
- Rozentāls, A. (2022). Vai, vai, mūsu mīļie! *Kultūras Diena*, 06.11.2022. Available: [https://www.diena.lv/raksts/kd/recenzijas/vai-vai-musu-milie-jrt-izrazu-\\_revolucija\\_-un-\\_operacija-mindfuck\\_-recenzija-14289174](https://www.diena.lv/raksts/kd/recenzijas/vai-vai-musu-milie-jrt-izrazu-_revolucija_-un-_operacija-mindfuck_-recenzija-14289174) (viewed 18.02.2024)
- Scepanski, P. (2021) *Tragedy Plus Time: National Trauma and Television Comedy*. Austin: University of Texas Press
- Svarinska, M. (2020). Kā lai uzlabo mūsu pasauli. *Latvijas Avīze. Kultūrzīmes*, 8.–14.07.2020., 7. lpp.

## ENACTING “REAL PEOPLE’S” EXPERIENCES OF WAR

Dr. phil. **Darija Davidović**

*Bern Academy of the Arts, Switzerland*

### Abstract

This article examines the role of autobiographical narratives in documentary theatre about war, focusing on the 2023 production *Exodus* directed by Mikheil Charkviani. *Exodus* is performed by individuals directly affected by war and is situated within the broader context of the *Theatre of the Real*, which foregrounds non-professional actors as both artistic medium and material and pursues an aesthetic of authenticity. The study uses biographical narrative interviews to explore participants’ motivations for sharing their war experiences on stage. It applies a hermeneutic analysis of *Exodus* to examine the work’s formal and aesthetic qualities. In addition, it investigates the connections between participants’ experiences, including the rehearsal process and the context of creation, and the formal and aesthetic elements of the play. The findings show that participants are mainly motivated by a sense of moral responsibility and a wish to raise awareness of the realities of war, which is also reflected in the formal and aesthetic direction of *Exodus*.

**Keywords:** *staging autobiographical narratives of war, theatre of the real, staging authenticity, misperformance*

### Introduction

Since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, theatre artists from Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries, such as Georgia, Belarus, and Lithuania [Diesselhorst 2023], have become increasingly prominent on German-speaking

theatre stages. Their guest performances provide diverse perspectives on the ongoing war, highlighting the historical connections to their home countries, especially regarding Russia's imperialistic influence on politics, culture, and society [ibid.]. What stands out in this context is the staging of autobiographical narratives performed by individuals who have personally experienced war. In most cases, they appear on stage for the first time, acting as witnesses, mediums of artistic expression, and the central subjects of the performance [Mumford, Garde 2015: 6]. The lack of professional theatre training among most of these performers can lead to forms of misperformance, such as failing to meet professional standards, which become memorable means of exploring themes such as death, authenticity, and affective labour. [ibid.: 11]. In addition, scholars such as Marvin Carlson, Carol Martin, Stephen Wilmer, and Milija Gluhović showcase 20th- and 21st-century plays that use autobiography to explore these themes, often frame personal and frequently violent experiences as theatrical testimonies within a global historical context [Gluhović, 2013: 131]. Carlson notes that autobiographical approaches are common in theatre addressing social and political issues of marginalised groups [Carlson, 1996: 605]; for instance, feminist theatre has used autobiography since the 1970s to convey the experiences of women and other marginalised individuals. The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre and Migration (2023) indicates that autobiographical material is central to contemporary documentary theatre on war, migration, and exile, often performed by non-professionals [Meerzon, Wilmer 2023]. Stephen Wilmer argues that refugees performing their own stories appear more vulnerable and convincing, intensifying the audience's sense of urgency [Wilmer, 2018: 86].

This article discusses and presents preliminary findings from my ongoing research into current plays on German-speaking stages that address the war in Ukraine and draw on these specific theatre practices.<sup>1</sup> My interest in such theatre practices goes beyond its aesthetic and formal aspects; I am also intrigued by the creative process, the experiences of the participants, and the underlying motivations for individuals to engage in such theatre projects: What motivates individuals who are not professional actors to share their war experiences on stage? How were the rehearsals conceived, and what specific working methods did the director apply? To explore these questions, I employ the empirical method of biographical narrative interviews [Rosenthal 2002; Rosenthal 2019] with participants involved in such performances

---

<sup>1</sup> My current research project, which examines the use of autobiographical narratives in contemporary documentary theater about war, is part of the research project *Ästhetisierung von Kriegsgewalt: Eine künstlerisch-wissenschaftliche Untersuchung des Einsatzes von Dokumenten in zeitgenössischen Theaterinszenierungen und Performances*, a research project led by Priska Gisler and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation [SNSF] from 2023 to 2027, see also <https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/208114>.

as well as with the director. According to sociologist Gabriele Rosenthal, this method is particularly effective for addressing sensitive topics such as war, as it enables respondents to narrate their stories in full, free from interruptions imposed by the researcher's agenda. Furthermore, this approach is well-suited for exploring significant life moments within the broader context of biographies [Rosenthal 2001]. Since most respondents are performers appearing on stage for the first time, it can be assumed that this represents a specific moment in their lives. Thus, two significant life experiences are brought together: the experience of war and the experience of performing on stage.

One of the first case studies examined in this research project, which I will discuss and analyse below, is *Exodus* by Georgian director Mikheil Charkviani. The performance was staged during the renowned theatre festival *Wiener Festwochen* in 2023 and ran for three consecutive evenings. Charkviani produced and staged *Exodus* in Tbilisi in 2022 before it was presented in Vienna [Gülseven 2023]. The following analysis is based on my field research in Vienna in 2023, which includes observations of *Exodus* through attendance at the performance and interviews with seven of the 15 participants, as well as the director.<sup>2</sup> I will first provide an overview of *Exodus* including contextual background, key artistic approaches, and a brief discussion of the differences between the Vienna and Tbilisi versions. I will then focus on the Vienna version of *Exodus* and apply a hermeneutic approach [Martin, Wilmer 1995] to an in-depth interpretation and analysis of the staging of personal experiences of war and displacement on stage. Finally, I will outline my interview methodology and discuss the insights gained from the interviews concerning the main research questions and my preliminary findings. This combination of empirical and hermeneutic approaches allows for a plurality of analytical perspectives on *Exodus*, enabling nuanced connections between participants' experiences, including the rehearsal process and the context of creation, and the production's formal and aesthetic elements.

### Creating "real people's" stories of war

*Exodus* is a documentary theatre project launched in 2022 in Tbilisi to portray the impact of war on individuals. For the Tbilisi production, the director conducted over 100 interviews, each condensed into about 10 minutes and presented across ten chapters per evening [Charkviani 2023]. In Vienna, fifteen interviews were similarly condensed into approximately 15 minutes each, arranged into five chapters per

---

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank my colleague, Diana Rojas-Feile, for her collaboration in developing the interview questions and conducting the interview with Mikhail Charkviani in Vienna 2023.



evening, with the individuals recounting their own stories on stage [ibid.]. Before the idea of *Exodus* occurred, Charkviani was working on *The Persians* by Aychilos [Gülseven 2023; Charkviani 2023]. However, in the wake of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he shifted his focus to collecting real-life war stories rather than using the fiction of ancient Greek tragedy to address the topic of war [ibid.]. He articulates this shift by asking "Why should I stage a theatre classic about war, why should I use fiction when I can use stories of real people?" [ibid.]. His experiences of the wars in Georgia, which affected him as a child and young adult and continue to influence his artistic work.<sup>3</sup> The situation in Ukraine had emotionally triggered him to the point that he saw no reason to continue working on *The Persians*, even though he and his team had already been rehearsing for weeks [Charkviani 2023]. Adding that he uses theatre to create a platform to "be somehow useful and helpful in those hard times" [ibid.]. His understanding of theatre closely resembles Bertolt Brecht's *Lehrstück* [learning play], which is characterised by its didactic purpose and primarily works with non-professional actors, whose autobiographical material forms the foundation to address urgent political issues [Kittstein 2012: 298]. Like the learning play, *Exodus* allows participants to recognise their societal roles by contributing as co-creators. Their autobiographical narratives are framed within the social and political context of their time, enhancing the subject and highlighting the emancipatory potential of such theatre practices. For the Tbilisi version, Charkviani and his team spoke with former soldiers, doctors, other medical personnel, and civilians. Most of them were internally displaced persons who had fled within Georgia, reenacting their war experiences through so-called verbatim theatre [Charkviani 2023]. In addition, they used personal effects such as photographs or old drawings to create an individual and artistic framework for each story [ibid.]. In Vienna, he followed the same method; however, the primary distinction was that, in this case, individuals from various countries who had sought refuge in Vienna performed their personal stories of war and escape. Cyrielle Garson outlines verbatim theatre as a form of "Documentary Realism – a historical aesthetic exponent that unproblematically draws the audience into the reality of a particular situation, topic, event or narrative being dramatised and authenticated through verbatim sources" [Garson 2021: 33]. Carol Martin describes such documentary theatre practices as *Theatre of the Real*, a term that encompasses various methods of recycling reality – personal, social, political, or historical – through quoting, simulating, and evoking the world outside the theatre [Martin 2013: 5]. This includes the use of "verbatim

---

<sup>3</sup> In an Interview with us Charkviani mentioned four wars in Georgia in the last 30 years. In an interview with Yaşam Özlem Gülseven he mentioned the Georgian Civil War [1991–1993], the War in Abkhazia [1992–1993], the South Ossetia War [1991–1992] and the Russo-Georgian War [2008]. See Gülseven, Y. Ö. [2023].



text, archival photos, film, audio recordings, and real clothing” [ibid.], as well as non-professional theatre performers portraying their own lives on stage [ibid.:80]. A key aspect of such theatre is “the practice of using self-representing people as both the artistic medium and material of a theatre event” [Mumford, Garde 2015: 6]. This kind of performer may appear in diverse genres like community-based theatre, documentary theatre, and verbatim theatre [ibid.]. Clare Bishop defines artworks such as *Exodus* involving non-professional performers representing their socio-economic categories as “delegated performances” [Bishop 2012: 5]. Specifically, she means “the act of hiring nonprofessionals or specialists in other fields to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his or her instructions” [ibid.: 91]. In her evaluation, she identifies several motivations for using individuals as performance material: challenging conventional artistic criteria by transforming everyday actions into performative acts, enhancing the visibility and complexity of social groups, incorporating chance and risk as aesthetic effects, and blurring the boundaries between live and mediated, spontaneous and staged, and authentic and fake performances [ibid.: 238–239]. Furthermore, Bishop assumes that these practices also explore the construction of collective identity and how individuals often transgress these categories [ibid.]. In *Exodus*, collective identities emerge from individual but shared experiences of war. This process can foster important social dynamics of recognition and empathy among ensemble members during rehearsals [Seginuck 2013] and can also activate change in the thinking and actions of the performers, thus reflecting one of the core principles of Brecht’s learning-play [Kittstein 2012: 299]. Along with the positive effects for the performers, the blending of real and fictional elements, as well as the distinction between seemingly authentic and scripted representations, can be accentuated by the non-professional status of the actors, who may exhibit forms of misperformance. This underscores significant concerns about authenticity and the director’s role in shaping the perceived authenticity of war narratives. Furthermore, Bishop’s argument contends that artistic practices where performers act under the name and direction of the artist require critical scrutiny –particularly regarding the potential for instrumentalisation and the ethical implications of exploiting others’ suffering for artistic purposes. Before delving into this, it is crucial to first examine the formal and aesthetic characteristics of *Exodus*, with the following analysis focusing on the Vienna version.

### **Viennese edition: A multi-perspective approach to war and displacement**

In the Vienna version of *Exodus*, the participants came from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, including a Viennese Holocaust

survivor, as well as individuals connected to the war through family or profession. Vienna is particularly well-suited to Chakrapani's theatre project, which engages with war from multiple perspectives, because of its complex historical and cultural context shaped by the intertwined histories of empire, conflict, and displacement. Vienna has long been a centre of immigration, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, owing to industrialisation, urbanisation, and lenient settlement laws [John 1996]. The rise of National Socialism led to the expulsion of Vienna's Jewish population in 1939 [ibid.] and subsequent migration, including labour migration (1963–1973) [Mijić 2022: 1074], the Yugoslavian Wars of Succession (1991–1995) [ibid.: 1075], asylum seekers since 2015 [Kubaczek 2016: 209], and refugees from Ukraine since 2022, have all affected the city's demographics.

The opening of the three consecutive performances of *Exodus* is marked by the 85-year-old Holocaust survivor Ludwig, who reads letters from his parents, who had to flee Austria following the 1938 so-called *Anschluss*. In addition to excerpts from the letters, photos from his family album are projected onto a screen, making them visible to the audience and enhancing his narrative with visual effects. These letters convey both anxiety about survival and hope for a return to Vienna and the possibility of a better future. Ludwig's performance is accompanied by Helal on the dambura, a traditional Afghan musical instrument. Helal, a young Afghan who fled to Vienna in 2011, tells his story in *Exodus* together with his close friend Ebrahim, with whom he shared a long and dangerous journey to Vienna that resulted in a deep friendship and a lasting musical collaboration. In contrast to Ludwig's earlier appearance, their portrayal does not draw on personal objects or focus on experiences of anxiety and loss. Instead, they appear visibly cheerful, standing arm in arm as they recount their perilous flight to Vienna and the strength of their friendship. Their segment takes the form of a reflection on friendship, culminating in a hopeful resolution to their escape story. Another performer, Dražen, recounts his escape from Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s, when he fled following the outbreak of the Yugoslav Wars and sought refuge in Vienna. Similar to Ludwig's appearance, photographs from Dražen's family album are projected onto the screen, with text and images interwoven in a cohesive manner that enhances the credibility of his narrative [Lock 2020: 428]. He not only narrates the story of his flight but also creates a photo collage during his performance, composed of layered images that chronologically trace his childhood in socialist Yugoslavia and lead up to the outbreak of the war. According to Milija Gluhović, it is easy to see how the photography used here can serve as a metaphor for memory: "the process of remembering and the subsequent inscription of the memory, both essential to the autobiographical act, find a perfect image in the photograph" [Gluhović 2013: 132]. Despite the scripted nature of his performance, Dražen's somewhat

unprofessional behaviour on stage, underscored by his visible nervousness, draws attention to the performance's emotional impact. As Mumford and Garde note, this kind of misperformance comes into play as an effective tool for engaging with topics such as flight, grief, and emotional labour [Mumford, Garde 2015: 11]. Furthermore, the act of reception is heightened by the performance's intermedial elements. Ludwig and Dražen draw on "the spatial three-dimensionality of a theatre stage, the two-dimensionality of a film screen, and the spatio-temporal dimensions [Meerzon 2012: 30] of their bodies, which they use as an autobiographical canvas" [ibid.]. By combining these various dimensions, Ludwig and Dražen create a complex, multi-layered self-performance that integrates physical presence, visual media, and autobiographical narratives. This approach enables them to explore and express their autobiographical content in a rich, immersive manner that engages the audience on multiple sensory and conceptual levels.

While all the episodes described here are performed in German, Halyna's performance stands out as it is delivered in Ukrainian, with a German translation projected on the screen. This emphasises the established migratory aesthetic in *Exodus*. As Janine Hauthal notes, the migratory aesthetic is not primarily concerned with performers' origins or migration histories, but rather with factors such as multilingualism [Hauthal 2023: 740]. The use of the first language plays a central role in this aesthetic, serving as a key to self-actualisation and as a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human [ibid.]. Halyna's performance also differs from the others in that she performs without props or additional participants. Reading from her manuscript, she recounts two stories of flight: the first in 2014, following the Euromaidan in Ukraine, and the second in 2022, after Russia's full-scale invasion. Her appearance on stage, combined with her restrained facial expressions and gestures, directs the focus to her spoken word: her testimony of war. The sensory perception of the scene is mainly conveyed through her voice, which, as Hans-Thies Lehmann suggests, acts as a connecting medium between the stage and the audience, making the shared theatrical moment particularly vivid for all involved [Lehmann 2004: 43]. This unique form of testimony reception is supported by the stage design, which resembles a white cube and creates an atmosphere that is simultaneously neutral and intense, pure and timeless, thereby directing the audience to focus entirely on the enactment of the war biographies. On the right wall, data on daily birth and death rates are projected, adding a fact-based layer to *Exodus* while invoking a metaphysical dimension by comparing life's basics: birth and death. This setup suggests a meta-level view of life and death in war, aligning with Edmund Husserl's notion that human life is tied to death and history, encompassing humanity's future and its cultural world [Husserl 2014: 101]. It underscores the significance of human life and mutual responsibility, resonating

with Emmanuel Lévinas's idea of recognising the 'Other' [Lévinas 1992: 78], which translates into acknowledging the performers' unique war experiences that reflect our shared ontology with the world, particularly regarding the fragility of our lives. Another striking stage element features children with headphones playing in a sandbox at the back of the stage, building and then destroying a city of sand before, as the final scene in *Exodus*, singing Rossini's *La Passeggiata*, a children's song of peace and joy. This closing scene highlights the themes of innocence, destruction, and hope. The children, representing future generations, illustrate the cycle of creation and destruction through the construction and demolition of the sand city. *La Passeggiata*, with its cheerful melody, underscores the contrast between peace and war and prompts reflection on hope and innocence in a world fraught with conflict, leaving a profound emotional impact.

### **Creating "Theatre of the Real": Artistic methods in *exodus***

During the interview with Charkviani, I learned more about his approach to *Exodus* and the challenges he encountered in realising his concept in Vienna. He explained that he begins by conducting interviews without using a recording device. This method enables him to focus on extracting key elements from each war story, collaborating with participants to create a realistic and cohesive narrative through a collective working process. It focuses on empathy and responsiveness to the narratives, requiring active and attentive listening [Hornung 2010: 136] to 'authentically' reconstruct the individual stories in the subsequent stages of the process. The narrative elements are then selected collaboratively with the participants and connected to personal mementoes to artistically highlight their unique experiences of war and displacement, which, as Charkviani emphasises, are presented as testimonies on stage only once [Charkviani 2023]. Despite scripted narratives, he places greater significance on spontaneous reactions, stating that this spontaneity is key to the overall creative process of *Exodus*. With this method, he seeks to portray the participants as unique personalities rather than mere archetypes or victims [ibid.]. The approach of eliciting spontaneous reactions, rather than adhering to a strict script, carries greater risks of misperformance while also producing aesthetic effects rooted in chance and unpredictability [Bishop, 2012: 238]. It underscores their inexperience on stage and, thus, their seemingly authentic presence. This technique reinforces the assumption of staged authenticity, which captivates the audience's sense of credibility and strengthens the belief that the performers are authentic, original speakers, allowing the audience to identify with them [Mumford, Garde 2015: 13]. Daniel Schulze argues that "authenticity arises as an ascription that is attached to the truth-value of the performance" [Schulze 2018: 228], suggesting that it is not inherent in the performance itself

but rather a quality ascribed by audiences: “Authenticity may then be conceived of as an audience’s strategy of making sense of a work” [ibid. 42]. In this process, the director deliberately steps back as a playwright, allowing the chosen verbatim texts to replace his voice [Martin 2010: 3]. This approach aligns with the strategies of the “Theatre of the Real”, which Martin regards as postmodern [Martin 2010: 3], particularly in its assertion that truth is contextual, multifaceted, and open to manipulation; that language shapes perception; that art can strive for objectivity [ibid.]; and in its aim to authentically represent reality on stage by integrating diverse perspectives, everyday life, and the simultaneity of past, present, and future [ibid.]. Rather than relying on a traditional playwright’s script, “Theatre of the Real” frequently emerges from collective texts. As Martin points out that, despite its experimental methods, the significance of the performance remains perceptible [ibid.].

In *Exodus*, the centrality of each individual experience of war and flight makes recognising these stories both essential and challenging for the audience. Through the presence of untrained performers and their “poetics of immediacy” [De Waal 2015: 17]—an approach that seeks to create a heightened sense of directness, vividness, and real-time experience [Magee 2022: 2], grounded in the direct transmission of testimony through witnessing—a distinctive form of authenticity emerges that emotionally resonates with the audience. This, in turn, fosters an immediate connection to the events and experiences depicted on stage.

### **Empirical approach to the study and evaluation of interviews**

Gabriele Rosenthal notes that the biographical narrative interview method is particularly effective for capturing vivid and dramatic war stories, as it centres the respondent’s narratives, fostering a natural, conversational flow that enhances both self-understanding and listener insight [Rosenthal 2002: 9]. By starting with a broad question, interviewees can recount freely. This approach is especially suited for exploring specific life events within broader histories, thus negating the need for a rigid interview guide [Rosenthal 2002: 133–134]. In this study, interviews were structured around questions such as: “(0) Could you please tell me a little about yourself and share your experiences with ‘Exodus’? (1) What motivated you to join ‘Exodus’? (2) How would you describe your collaboration with the director (including any thoughts on potential instrumentalisation)? (3) How has performing on stage affected you?” [Davidović 2023]. Using Heiner Legewie’s interpretative method, narratives were evaluated for credibility, coherence, and completeness, like narrative validation in everyday communication [Legewie 1987: 145]. The interpretative approach was applied to analyse responses, guided by a consensus-based framework rooted in Habermas’s theory of communicative action. This approach aims at

achieving rational, domination-free understanding. By meeting validity claims such as comprehensibility, truth, or correctness and assuming an ideal speech situation, it seeks to foster consensus through argumentation and discourse, where the "better argument" should prevail [Habermas, 1984]. When asked about their reasons for joining *Exodus*, five of the seven interviewees expressed a desire to raise awareness of the realities of war through their personal stories. Four also cited a moral responsibility to act due to ongoing conflicts in their home countries, including two Ukrainians who arrived in Vienna in 2022 and two Syrians who fled to Vienna in 2015 and 2016. Additionally, two participants who initially hesitated were encouraged by friends, while a psychotherapist hoped to highlight both the suffering of refugees and her professional work. For many, the festival *Wiener Festwochen* was seen as a meaningful platform for advancing these goals. Regarding collaboration with the director, interviewees first described their general experiences without specifically mentioning instrumentalisation. They all reported appreciation, empathy, and support from Charkviani, later clarifying that they did not feel exploited, which can largely be attributed to his focus on active listening and empathetic communication. The only drawback mentioned by some participants was the limited rehearsal time, which left them feeling insufficiently prepared for the stage. However, this limitation can be understood as a strategic decision by the director to provoke forms of misperformance, such as nervousness or hesitation in staging the participants' stories, that deliberately depart from professional performance standards. This approach aimed to create a perceived authenticity, portraying the performers as real people rather than fictional characters. Finally, six of the seven participants reported that performing in *Exodus* significantly influenced their self-understanding, providing new perspectives on their war experiences. Two Ukrainians were inspired to deepen their involvement in similar projects. One of them mentioned at the end of the interview that she was planning to write a book. Similarly, one of the Syrian participants was inspired by his participation in *Exodus* to write an essay about his war experiences, a creative process he now wishes to continue. This suggests that involvement in the theatre project fostered a sustained engagement with writing and self-expression.

### **Exodus as a platform for advocating peace**

Drawing on Carol Martin's concept of the "Theatre of the Real", *Exodus* demonstrates how the realities of war and displacement can be brought to the stage through verbatim texts, personal artefacts, and the participation of non-professional performers who share their personal stories. This approach complicates the distinction between performance and lived experience, questioning conventional ideas of theatrical representation.



Charkviani's artistic approach aligns with postmodern strategies of documentary theatre that seek to render reality on stage with authenticity, to offer multiple perspectives on war and displacement, and to explore the coexistence of past, present, and future. The risk of mistakes, caused by spontaneity and limited rehearsals, appears to be a central strategy for evoking an aesthetic of authenticity and thereby promoting a deeper emotional response. This form of manipulation, described by Wilmer as an inherent aspect of documentary theatre as a manipulative art form [Wilmer 2018: 94], is harnessed by Charkviani to make a powerful artistic statement in times of war. This approach, reminiscent of Brecht's concept of learning-play, enables participants to recognise their societal roles and contribute as co-creators, underscoring the emancipatory potential of such artistic practices. The study also reveals that the participants are primarily motivated by a sense of moral responsibility and a desire to raise awareness of the realities of war. This aligns with the historical use of autobiographical approaches in theatre, which have often addressed social and political issues faced by marginalised groups.

Charkviani's working method, grounded in empathy, active listening, and collaborative storytelling, helps to alleviate concerns that the performers' experiences might be instrumentalised. Instead, it fosters a sense of agency among the participants and echoes Bishop's observations on the construction of collective identity in delegated performances. Many participants reported that their involvement in *Exodus* significantly influenced their self-perception and inspired further creative engagement with their war experiences. In summary, *Exodus* exemplifies how documentary theatre can serve as a medium for reflecting on the realities of war and fostering critical awareness among audiences. The specific staged aesthetics of the real evoke deep emotional responses, inspiring social change and fostering a more profound understanding of the human cost of conflict.

### Sources

- Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso.
- Carlson, M. (1996). Performing the Self. *Modern Drama*, No. 39 (4), pp. 599–608.
- Charkviani, M. (2023). Interviewed by Darija Davidović and Diana Rojas-Feile. 12 June, Vienna. Unpublished.
- Davidović, D. (2023). Question catalog of the biographical narrative interviews for the study of the theatre project Exodus. Unpublished.
- Diesselhorst, S. (2023). Radar Ost – Deutsches Theatre Berlin. Videobotschaft von der Front. *Nachtkritik*. Available: <https://www.nachtkritik.de/nachtkritiken/deutschland/berlin-brandenburg/berlin/deutsches-theater-berlin/radar-ost-deutsches->



- theater-berlin-gepraegt-von-der-politischen-reality-zeigt-das-festival-zum-letzten-mal-starke-kuenstlerische-positionen-aus-osteuropa (viewed 24.09.2024)
- Gluhović, M. (2013). *Performing European Memories. Trauma, Ethics, Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gülseven, Y. Ö. (2023). *Exodus and the Autobiography of War at Tbilisi International Festival*. HowlRound Theatre Commons. Available: <https://howlround.com/exodus-and-autobiography-war-tbilisi-international-festival> (viewed 08.09.2024)
- Habermas, J. (1984). *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Hauthal, J. (2023). Contemporary (Post-)Migrant Theatre in Belgium and the Migratory Aesthetics of Milo Rau's Theatre of the Real. In: Y. Meerzon, S. E. Wilmer (eds.). *The Palgrave handbook of theatre and migration*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 739–750.
- Hornung, E. (2010). Die Rede des Anderen: narrative Interviews versus psychoanalytische Interviews; Überlegungen zum Setting. *BIOS – Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen*, No. 23 (1), pp. 127–137.
- Husserl, E. (2014). Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie. Analysen des Unbewusstseins und der Instinkte. Metaphysik. Späte Ethik (Texte aus dem Nachlass 1908–1937). Dordrecht: Springer.
- John, M. (1996). *Mosaik, Schmelztiegel, Weltstadt Wien? Migration und multikulturelle Gesellschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Dokumentationszentrum Wien. Available: [https://www.demokratiezentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/john\\_mosaik.pdf](https://www.demokratiezentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/john_mosaik.pdf) (viewed 08.09.2024)
- Kubaczek, N. (2016). Dealen, Schleppen, Willkommenheissen. Kämpfe um Bewegungsfreiheit nach dem langen Sommer der Migration. In: S. Hess et al. (eds.). *Der lange Sommer der Migration. Grenzregime III*. Berlin: Assoziation, pp. 2017–214.
- Legewie, H. (1987). Interpretation und Validierung biographischer Interviews. In: G. Jüttemann, H. Thomae (eds.). *Biographie und Psychologie*. Berlin: Springer, pp. 138–150.
- Lehmann, H. T. (2004). Prädramatische und postdramatische Theater-Stimmen. Zur Erfahrung der Stimme in der Live-Performance. In: D. Kolesch, J. Schrödl (eds.). *Kunst-Stimmen*. Berlin: Theater der Zeit, pp. 40–66.
- Lévinas, E. (1992). *Ethik und Unendliches. Gespräche mit Philippe Nemo*. Wien: Passagen.
- Kittstein, U. (2012). Episches Theater. In: P. W. Marx (eds.). *Handbuch Drama. Theorie, Analyse, Geschichte*. Stuttgart: Metzler, pp. 296–304.
- Lock, I. (2020). Wie wirkt kongruente Text-Bild-Sprache auf Glaubwürdigkeit und Handlungsabsichten in der Integrationsdebatte? Ein Online-Experiment zu den Internetseiten der Bertelsmann Stiftung und des Bundesinnenministeriums. *Publizistik*, No. 65, pp. 425–450.

- Magee, P. (2022). Considerations on the immediacy of poetic thought. *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses*, No. 26 (1), pp. 1–21.
- Martin, J., Sauter, W. (1995). *Understanding Theatre. Performance Analysis in Theory and Practice*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.
- Martin, C. (2010). Introduction: Dramaturgy of the Real. In: C. Martin (eds.). *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–14.
- Martin, C. (2013). *Theatre of the Real*. Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meerzon, Y., Wilmer, S. E. (2023). *The Palgrave handbook of theatre and migration*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Mijić, A. (2020). Together divided–divided together: Intersections of symbolic boundaries in the context of ex-Yugoslavian immigrant communities in Vienna. *Ethnicities*, No. 20 (6), pp. 1071–1092.
- Mumford, M., Garde, U. (2015). Staging Real People: On the Arts and Effects of Non-Professional Theatre Performers. *Performance Paradigm*, No. 11, pp. 5–15.
- Rosenthal, G. (2002). *Biographisch-narrative Gesprächsführung: zu den Bedingungen heilsamen Erzählens im Forschungs- und Beratungskontext*. Psychotherapie und Sozialwissenschaft, No. 4 (3), pp. 204–227. Available: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssor-56763> (viewed 18.09.2024)
- Rosenthal, G. (2019). Erzählbarkeit, biographische Notwendigkeit und soziale Funktion von Kriegserzählungen. Zur Frage: was wird gerne und leicht erzählt. *BIOS*, No. 32 (1–2), pp. 116–135.
- Sepinuck, T. (2013). *Theatre of witness: finding the medicine in stories of suffering, transformation and peace*. London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- De Waal, A. (2015). Staging Wounded Soldiers: The Affects and Effects of Post-Traumatic Theatre. *Performance Paradigm*, No. 11, pp. 16–31.
- Wilmer, S. E. (2018). *Performing Statelessness in Europe*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

SECTION III:

**FRAMEWORKS OF PERFORMANCE:  
INSTITUTIONS, DISCOURSES, TRANSITION**

## THEATRE MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE IN THE REGIONS OF LATVIA

Dr. art. **Vēsma Lēvalde**

*Riga Technical University, Latvia*

Ph. D. **Sigita Ignatjeva**

*Riga Technical University, Latvia*

### Abstract

The research concerns the future of professional arts outside the capital and aims to examine the situation of professional theatre art in the regions, comparing the impact of state theatre and municipal theatre status on artistic processes. The study focuses on comparing the operating models of two Latvian regional theatres – the Liepāja Theatre and the Daugavpils Theatre. Both theatres are the only professional theatres in their respective regions and have similar objective parameters. However, their management models differ – the Daugavpils Theatre is a direct state administration institution, while the Liepāja Theatre is a municipal capital company or a limited liability company with all shares controlled by the Liepāja City Municipality. The study compares the budgeting principles of the two theatres and analyses the statistical data and the tasks set for the theatres by the supervisory institutions. Likewise, it compares the artistic principles of the two theatres and records the results of their professional activities, using nominations for the national annual prize “Spēlmaņu nakts” as a criterion. The study concludes that the theatre management model does not directly impact performance in the short term. However, in the long term, the municipal model poses several risks. The remuneration criteria in public theatres are considerably more transparent, whereas in a municipal theatre, they are determined by the subjective

decisions of two board members. Therefore, changing the board without changing the operating model does not guarantee a positive change in the theatre.

**Keywords:** *theatre management, regional theatre, operating model*

## Introduction

Our research question concerns the future of professional theatre art outside the capital. Latvia has a different theatre management system from the other Baltic States, which will be outlined later in the study. However, the issues for professional arts in a regional context could be similar, namely, relatively small local potential audiences, correlations between funding and artistic quality, and maintaining professional standards in the long term. The topic's relevance is also confirmed by the increased interest in theatre management models in professional publications in the post-pandemic period. The Spanish Association of Directors' publication *ADE/Teatro* [for example, Campos 2023; Iglesias 2023; Zaharjeva 2023], the Latvian magazine *Teātra Vēstnesis* [for example, Rozentāls 2023; Rutkēviča 2023; Šermeneva 2023] and a series of podcasts on theatre operating models in different European countries produced by the Latvian Theatre Workers' Union in 2024.

The management system of theatres in Latvia is not homogeneous. There are eight theatres of direct state administration or state capital companies subordinate to the Ministry of Culture, three theatres of indirect state administration or municipal theatres (two of which are semi-professional), and several non-governmental organisations (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Latvian theatre operating models

Direct state administration (state limited liability company)	Indirect state administration (municipal limited liability company)	Non- governmental organisations
The New Riga Theatre	Jūrmala Theatre (amateur)	DDT
Daile Theatre	Ogre Theatre (semi-professional)	ĢIT
Latvian National Theatre	Liepāja Theatre	Joriks
Daugavpils Theatre	Liepāja Puppet Theatre (semi-professional)	Kvadrifrons
Valmiera Theatre		and others
Latvian Puppet Theatre		
Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre		
The Latvian National Opera and Ballet		

Source: Ministry of Culture, Latvian Theatre Union (LTDS)

All professional and semi-professional theatres can apply for funding from the State Culture Capital Foundation (SCCF) for specific projects through a tender process. Non-state theatres receive funding only through tenders, while state and municipal theatres additionally receive targeted grants. In Latvia, outside Riga, the capital, there are three professional repertory theatres with buildings built for this specific purpose – in Valmiera, Daugavpils, and Liepāja. Each of them is the only professional theatre in its region, but only in Liepāja, the theatre is entirely under the municipality's control. The Ministry of Culture does not plan to become the holder of its capital shares [Correspondence 2023a]. The study aims to determine whether the management model affects the operation of a theatre by comparing the theatres of Liepāja and Daugavpils, which share many similar objective parameters. The Valmiera Theatre is not included in the study as its building is being reconstructed during the period under review, and therefore, the comparison would not be adequate.

The study consists of three parts and conclusions. The first part, “Regional Theatres in Latvia”, briefly describes the status and funding of the Liepāja Theatre and the Daugavpils Theatre. The second part, “Problematic Regional Status”, examines the problems a regional theatre encounters due to its legal status in comparison to that of state theatres. The third part, “Sinergy of Art and Finance”, discusses the impact of theatres' operational models on artistic performance.

### **Regional theatres in Latvia**

Before the pandemic, 57% of the population in Latvia enjoyed culture in person in their region. [Culturelab 2016: 52] This number dropped to 26% during the pandemic [LR KM 2020: 64], and also post-pandemic in-person cultural activity continues to decline, along with the number of residents, hence reducing both the existing and potential cultural audience. [LKA 2022: 6] Considering that Daugavpils and Liepāja are not surrounded by potential spectators geographically – Daugavpils is located at the border of Latvia and even the European Union, while Liepāja is located at the Baltic Sea, it can be concluded that the operation of regional theatres is impossible without grants. The research gains particular relevance as Liepāja prepares to serve as the European Capital of Culture in 2027; however, it must be recognised that this status has not been attained through as long-term national cultural policy, but rather despite the national cultural policy, at least in the field of theatre. To justify this claim, it is necessary to examine the historical context. Since the beginning of the 20th century, in Liepāja, the largest city in the southwestern region of Latvia, there have been two distinct directions of professional art – theatre and music. From 1922, the Liepāja New Theatre and the Liepāja Opera operated in the same building. Both were supported by the municipality and

the state. [Caune 1925: 56–57] In 1934, amid the economic crisis, the Theatre and the Opera were united and placed under the control of the municipality, creating the Liepāja City Drama and Opera. [Latvijas Kareivis 1934b: 6] The municipality's funding was supplemented by a grant from the Latvian Cultural Foundation – both for the theatre and the opera performances. [Latvijas Kareivis 1934a: 2] During the years of Soviet occupation, the Opera was closed, the Symphony Orchestra was funded by the municipality, and the Liepāja theatre was financed by the state. In 1997, due to the economic crisis, the Theatre was handed over to the municipality; in 2005, it acquired the status of a municipal corporate enterprise. However, it still retained both state and municipal funding. In 2009, Latvia found itself in the midst of another economic crisis, and the Minister of Culture, Ints Dālderis, announced that theatres in Liepāja and Daugavpils would have to close due to a lack of funds. [Dālderis 2009] As a result, the Liepāja Symphony Orchestra, which previously was financed by both the state and the municipality, was transferred to the state, but the oldest Latvian professional theatre in Liepāja, from then on, had to be financed by the municipality. The Daugavpils Theatre has maintained its national status as an important professional art centre in Latgale, where it stages plays in Latvian, Latgalian, and Russian.

The comparison of the Liepāja Theatre's and the Daugavpils Theatre's financial situation is displayed in Table 2. In 2023, the state allocated €1.65 million to the Daugavpils Theatre budget. The Theatre's own revenue is set at €298,000, including a Daugavpils Council grant of €98,000. The total share of own revenue in the budget is approximately 11%. During the pandemic, the Theatre had no own revenue, and the budget consisted only of a state grant. In 2023 and 2024, the theatre plans its budget similarly to that before the pandemic. [Šapošņikovs 2023]

**Table 2. Comparison of financial indicators**

	Daugavpils Theatre	Liepāja Theatre
Annual budget	approx. €2 million	approx. €2 million
Turnover 2023 (half-year)	€164,489	€439,290
Profit 2023 (half-year)	€41,875	€110,895
Creditors, total	€322,380	€519,880
Debtors, total	€4,570	€122,558

Source: Annual reports (2023/I–VI)

The Liepāja Theatre's budget usually consists of the municipal grant (60%) and its own revenues from ticket sales, funding raised through project tenders, and paid services – rent of premises and costumes, and excursions (in total 40%).



The exception was during the pandemic, when ticket revenue plummeted by 70%, and the municipality was forced to increase the grant, if only to maintain the theatre building and staff. Then the Theatre's own revenue decreased to 16%. The Theatre draws a very small part of its budget from the SCCF – before the pandemic, the funding raised €12,000 in 2019. In 2022 and 2023, the Theatre received support from the EU Recovery Fund: €200,000 per year for new productions, but the programme ends this year. Inflation adds to pandemic losses. In 2018, the average cost per production in the Large Hall was €30,000, and in the Small Hall – up to €15,000. After the pandemic, prices for all raw materials and external services have risen significantly, and this season, the Large Hall production costs can reach at least €40,000, and the Small Hall – around 20–25 thousand EUR. [Lēvalde 2023: 29–34] For example, in 2024, a Small Hall production of “Ziloņa dziesma” (*The Elephant's Song*) was planned at an estimated cost of €29,000, while a Large Hall production of “Tēvs Klusums” (*Father Silence*) was planned at the cost of €44,000. The balance sheets of both theatres have worsened accordingly, especially for the Liepāja Theatre.

### Problematic regional status

Regional theatres have always had difficulty attracting and retaining new actors. If they study in Riga, they also want to stay and work in the capital. Therefore, since 1971, acting studios have been created in Liepāja, which over time have been attached to various educational institutions, both for professional education and for academic bachelor's degrees. In 2017, the Liepāja Theatre, in cooperation with the University of Liepāja, developed an acting study programme, and the municipality allocated over €200,000 to support this programme during the four study years (2017–2021)<sup>1</sup>. Conversely, the Daugavpils Theatre educates its actors at the Staņislavs Broks Daugavpils Music Secondary School in the professional education curriculum “Theatre Art”, and the state budget fully finances it.

The second problem that regional theatres have always struggled with is the departure of the most talented actors and directors to the capital. At the Liepāja Theatre, shortly before the beginning of the 2023/2024 season, an internal conflict emerged gaining wide publicity in the national media. As a result, the contracts with the Theatre Board were not automatically extended, and an open competition for the theatre director and artistic director positions was being prepared. Temporarily, the duties of a member of the board were fulfilled by Timurs Tomsons, the Chairman of the Liepāja Concert Hall Board, until 1 February 2024. Already at the end of

---

<sup>1</sup> Data provided by Zanda Gūtmane, Head of the Liepāja University study programme “Stage Acting”.

2022, the leading actor of the theatre troupe, Egons Dombrovskis, announced his departure to Riga; in the summer of 2023, the capital also attracted the young actress Madara Viļčuka, who had already played several leading roles at the Liepāja Theatre. The chief director, Dmitrijs Petrenko, moved from Liepāja to Tallinn, and Edgars Pujāts, one of the most experienced actors was transitioned from permanent to freelance status. The detailed reasons for the conflict are available to the public, but the municipality refused to hand over the actors' collective statement even for research purposes. However, from the public information, it can be inferred that the conflict stems from the actors' unfulfilled artistic ambitions and their salaries, which are lower than those of actors in the capital.

Actors' salaries in all professional theatres are tied to their employment and artistic achievements, as they consist of fixed parts and bonuses (see Table 3). There are no substantial differences in the amplitude of the fixed part. Still, the principles of determining the variable part differ; therefore, an objective comparison of the actors' salaries is impossible. However, the very principles by which the variable part is determined are more clearly defined for the state theatres. At the Liepāja Theatre, the board determines the variable part, which introduces the risk of subjectivity.

**Table 3. Comparison of remuneration practices**

Theatre	Artistic staff (number)	Monthly salary range (gross)	Variable component of salary
Dailes Theatre	50	950–2400	based on agreed principles
National Theatre	60	970–1850	based on agreed principles
JRT (New Riga Theatre)	27	1070–1595	based on agreed principles
Valmiera Theatre	31	1100–2400	based on agreed principles
Liepāja Theatre	30	900–1600	determined by the board
Daugavpils Theatre	48	930–1400	undefined

Source: information from theatres

In January 2024, the competition for the board member positions in the Liepāja Theatre ended, and a director belonging to the middle generation, Valters Sīlis, the current founder of the project theatre DDT (Riga), was elected as the artistic director of the Liepāja Theatre, while the financial management of the Theatre was left in the hands of the ex- and new board member Eva Ciekurze. Both new Board members, Sīlis and Ciekurze, have submitted their strategic vision for the next five years in the competition. According to the information provided by the municipality, a new strategy for the Theatre will be developed after the approval of both Board

members, but it is currently unknown whether the vision of the artistic director or the financial manager will be given the preference<sup>2</sup> and what will be the compromises that the shareholder, the municipality, will demand in the delegation contract that will be concluded by the municipality with the Theatre Board [Correspondence 2024]. The Delegation Contract (on behalf of the municipality, it is concluded between the Liepāja Culture Board and the Theatre Board) on the implementation of delegated functions in the operation of the capital company is concluded anew every year; the current contract is still being drafted. The previous delegation contract set out the Liepāja Theatre's aim of being an internationally competitive arts and culture centre, offering a professional dramatic theatre programme "with cultivated musical traditions for every visitor"; however, the funding for international activity was not earmarked. [Mērķi 2021] Likewise, the prescriptive requirements implicitly emphasise the commercial aspect of the theatre performances.

The Daugavpils Theatre Board, as that in Liepāja, consists of two Board members: the artistic director and the director of the Theatre. The principles of fixed-term contracts are also similar. The state grant is awarded quarterly, and the funding must be used under the delegation agreement concluded between the Ministry and the Theatre. The contract specifies the minimum number of in-house and touring performances, including in foreign countries. It is determined that there should be at least one international cooperation project per year, and its funding has been marked; the necessary investments in technical support have also been marked in the allocated budget.

### **Synergy of art and finance**

The results of the theatres' artistic activity should be reasonably similar under approximately the same budget, personnel, potential audience, and similarly defined goals and tasks of the artistic activity. However, the reality is significantly different (see Table 4). Compared with the Daugavpils Theatre, the Liepāja Theatre attracts about twice as many spectators and performs twice as many plays. The repertoire of the Liepāja Theatre, under the management of the former Board, was formally controlled by the Repertoire Council. The Council includes actors, the Theatre's artistic and technical management, and hired consultants. However, in practice, the Council approved an already developed proposal, which, until the end of the previous board's term in September 2023, was prepared by the artistic director and the director of the Theatre (the same person, Herberts Laukšteins, held both

---

<sup>2</sup> Although the new board has been approved, as of 5 February 2024, the strategic issues have not yet been discussed.

positions). The choice of actors for the roles was also under the control of Laukšteins, and such a situation does not exclude the risk of subjectivity.

**Table 4. Number of spectators and performances (2022/2023)**

	Daugavpils Theatre	Liepāja Theatre
Total number of spectators	24,679	58,333
Home performances	130	213
Performances elsewhere	17	34
New performances	7	10

Source: information from theatres

The Daugavpils Theatre's repertoire policy is created and approved by the Theatre Board together with experts from the Theatre's artistic staff. The number of premieres and their scale depend on the budget, but not the quality or content of the shows. The Daugavpils Theatre artistic director and head of the Board, Oļegs Šapošņikovs, admits that the status of a state capital company is optimal for performing functions of national importance. Still, the criteria for evaluating the activities should be changed by developing particular criteria for commercial companies engaged in theatre art. The previous government prepared amendments to the Law on Governance of Capital Shares of a Public Person and Capital Companies, which, among other things, provide for the division of capital companies into commercial capital companies, commercial capital companies dependent on the state budget, and non-commercial capital companies dependent on the state budget. Strengthening such division in the regulatory framework is logical and correct in the opinion of the current Ministry of Culture, but it is not known when they will enter into force and whether the amendments to the Law will also apply to municipal capital companies. So far, there are no indications of a change in the status of the Theatre operations [Correspondence 2023b]. To support the Liepāja Theatre as an important regional cultural centre, the Ministry of Culture invited the SCCF in 2023 to consider amending the rules of the target programme for professional arts development centres of national or regional significance in Latvian regions, so that the Liepāja Theatre could benefit from this support. However, the SCCF initially rejected this possibility, reiterating that 'for new productions, Liepāja Theatre Ltd. can apply for support in the regular project competitions organised by the SCCF' [Vērpe, 2023]. The Liepāja Theatre prepares applications and requests funding every year. In 2024, the Theatre submitted two co-financing applications to the competition, i.e. €12,000 for the production "Tēvs

Klusums”<sup>3</sup> (“Father Silence”) and € 7,000 for the production “Ziloņa dziesma”<sup>4</sup> (“The Elephant Song”), as well as €6,000 for the travel expenses during guest performances in April and May in other regions of Latvia. In the first half of 2025, the Liepāja Theatre’s net turnover increased to EUR 664,120. This was achieved finally by including the theatre in the regional development target programme “Provision of professional art at the Liepāja Theatre in 2025”, which was allocated EUR 100,000 by the State Culture Capital Foundation. The theatre has also applied for the programme for 2026, but the grant amount is unknown and the SCCF does not guarantee long-term financial stability.

## Conclusions

The theatre management model does not directly affect the performance results in the short term. However, in the long term, the municipal model involves several risks. The municipality’s requirements for the theatre are more prescriptive than the state’s requirements and theoretically may include restrictions on performance. The financial capacity of the municipality is smaller than that of the state budget, which means unequal competitive conditions for regional theatres. The Liepāja Theatre achieves higher quantitative and qualitative results, but it is in a financially worse situation. Salary criteria in state theatres are significantly more transparent, while in municipal theatres, i.e. the Liepāja Theatre, they are determined by the subjective decision of two board members. However, changing the board without changing the management model does not guarantee positive changes in the Theatre. The Ministry of Culture’s proposal to make SCCF funds more accessible to the Liepāja Theatre, followed by the theatre’s subsequent inclusion in the 2025 target programme, significantly improved its financial situation. However, this support does not guarantee that such opportunities will be available annually. Evidence of this is seen in the SCCF Board’s refusal in 2024 to include the Liepāja Theatre in the target programme for regional professional arts support.

## Sources

Campos, R. (2023). Residencias y resistencias. *ADE/Teatro*, No. 194, pp. 55–59.

Caune, V. (1925). *Sabiedriskā dzīve Liepājā*. Liepājas 300 gadu jubilejas piemiņai 1625–1925. Liepājas pilsētas valdes izdevums, 56.–57. lpp.

Correspondence (2023a). Electronic correspondence between the Ministry of Culture and the study’s authors, 20 October 2023 and 29 December 2023.

---

<sup>3</sup> By Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce, directed by Valters Sīlis.

<sup>4</sup> By Nicolas Billon, directed by Dmitrijs Petrenko.

- Correspondence (2023b). Electronic correspondence between the Ministry of Culture and the study's authors, 29 December 2023.
- Correspondence (2024). Electronic correspondence between Liepāja Culture Board and the study's authors, 17 January 2024.
- Culturelab (2016). Kultūras auditorija Latvijā: situācija, procesi, tendences. Biedrība "Culturelab", Rīga, 2016, 52. lpp. Available: <https://culturelablv.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/kultc5abras-auditorija-latvije481-2016.pdf> (viewed 03.10.2023)
- Dālderis (2009). Dālderis: laika ar astoņiem teātriem slikst, diviem ir jāizkāpj... Available: <https://jauns.lv/raksts/zinas/228156-dalderis-laiva-ar-astoniem-teatriem-slikst-diviem-ir-jaizkapj> (viewed 03.10.2023)
- Iglesias, A. (2023). Teatros para la residencia en Extremadura. *ADE/Teatro*, No. 194, pp. 60–65.
- Latvijas Kareivis (1934a). Kultūras fonda budžets 1934–35. gadam pieņemts. *Latvijas Kareivis*, Nr. 105, 15.05., 2. lpp.
- Latvijas Kareivis (1934b). Liepājas mākslas iestāžu reorganizācija. *Latvijas Kareivis*, Nr. 289, 21.12., 6. lpp.
- Lēvalde, V. (2023). La organizacion del teatro regional ne Letonia. El ejemplo del Liepāja Theatre. *ADE/Teatro*, No. 194, pp. 29–34.
- LKA (2022). LKA, SIA Pētījumu centrs, SKDS. *Kultūras aktivitātes barometrs*. Kultūras patēriņa un līdzdalības ietekmes pētījums. Rīga: Latvijas Kultūras akadēmija, 2022, 6. lpp. Available: <https://www.km.gov.lv/lv/media/29958/download?attachment> (viewed 05.10.2023)
- LR KM (2020). LKA, SIA "Analītisko pētījumu un stratēģiju laboratorija", SKDS. *Kultūras patēriņa un līdzdalības ietekmes ziņojums*. LR Kultūras ministrija, 2020, 64. lpp. Available: <https://www.km.gov.lv/lv/media/11801/download> (viewed 03.10.2023)
- Mērķi (2021). SIA "Liepājas teātris" vispārējie stratēģiskie mērķi. Available: [https://liepajasteatris.lv/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Visparejie-strategiskie-merki\\_2021-1.pdf](https://liepajasteatris.lv/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Visparejie-strategiskie-merki_2021-1.pdf) (viewed 22.01.2024)
- Rozentāls, A. (2023). Kā atrast īsti direktoru. *Teātra Vēstnesis*, Nr. IV, 29–30. lpp.
- Rutkēviča, Anda. Pārvaldība ir atbildības uzņemšanās. *Teātra Vēstnesis*, Nr. IV, 31–37. lpp.
- Šapošņikovs, O. (2023). Information provided by Daugavpils Theatre artistic director Oļegs Šapošņikovs to the study's authors, 6 September 2023.
- Šermeņeva, J. (2023). Teātru pārvaldība un pārmaiņas. *Teātra Vēstnesis*, Nr. IV, 27–28. lpp.
- Vērpe, E. (2023). Electronic response from the Director of SCCF Edgars Vērpe to the study's authors, 29 December 2023.
- Zaharjeva, Th. (2023). El arte teatral en Bulgaria. Estructura de la red teatral bulgara. *ADE/Teatro*, No. 194, pp. 34–41.



# RESEARCH CHALLENGES CONCERNING THE LATE 20th-CENTURY ARTS IN LATVIA: CONTEXT FOR MUSIC THEATRE STUDIES

PhD **Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča**

*Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, Latvia*

## *Abstract*

The article attempts to articulate a few research challenges and problems faced by a scholar working actively in the field of art and culture studies. The aim is to foster the discussion about common problems and opportunities dealing with relatively recent history (late Soviet period of the 1980s, the transition period (National Awakening) and the 1990s) of performing arts and musical theatre among them. Focusing on the necessity of critical assessment of the existing published sources, the structured interviews with the persons involved in the culture processes of the research period help in gathering important information, but do not exclude selective memories and “out of records” issues that lead to the ethical choices of the scholar on research design, content and potential outcomes. The case study of the history of the Latvian National Opera is contextualised with relevant theoretical approaches that discuss the decolonisation of knowledge and the activation of multidimensional critical thinking in musicology, theatre, and culture studies.

**Keywords:** *research challenges, musicology, Latvian National opera, opera, music theatre, 1980s and 1990s, transition period*

---

*Culture Crossroads*

Volume 30, 2025, doi <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol30.586>

© Latvian Academy of Culture, Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča

All Rights Reserved.

ISSN: 2500-9974



Research on recent history tends to be both exciting and problematic. In particular, this premise applies to the late Soviet and transition periods in Latvian art, namely, the late 1980s and early 1990s. Currently, a small group of scholars at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music together with other four research institutions implements the project “Cultural and creative ecosystem of Latvia as a resource of resilience and sustainability”/CERS, which is part of the State Research Program “Latvian Culture – a Resource for National Development” (2023–2026) funded by the Ministry of Culture. Dealing with the field of opera and musical theatre and relevant contexts, my research focuses on revising the existing discourse and uncovering the less-studied issues of the 1980s and 1990s from today’s perspective. Through interviews, press reviews, and a reassessment of the events from a relatively close time distance, the collected information transforms into recent history that has shaped the present and left footprints in today’s scene of Latvian musical theatre. This article is an attempt to articulate a few research challenges and problems faced by a scholar working actively in the field in order to foster the discussion about common problems and opportunities dealing with the relatively recent history of performing arts and musical theatre among them. The challenges listed in this article have been identified in the early phases of the research through the examination of available published and unpublished sources, interviews with respondents involved in the cultural processes of the transition period, and a hermeneutical assessment of the potential outcomes of the study.

The primary consideration is the researcher’s own perspective on to the period under study. Since the history in question (research subject) dates back a few decades, the researchers have the privilege of contacting eyewitnesses and contemporaries to collect their memories of the time. Besides, there is a high possibility that the researcher has direct experience related to the research period in one way or another. Therefore, strict generalisations are impossible due to the diversity of direct experience perspectives, conscious or unconscious inherited matrices of thinking and individual and collective memory. German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer writes about the intertwining of the experience and tradition (*Überlieferung*) that is inherited over generations [Gadamer 1999: 468]. The experience in this case implies awareness of the existence of several interpretations of the same phenomenon, thereby reducing categorical judgements and the development of unproductive confrontations over historical “truths”. It is essential to admit that every researcher’s understanding is limited, or at least influenced, by individual experience and the contexts that shape it. In the social sciences, this “kit” is sometimes referred to as pluriversity, in which different, inseparable experiences, knowledge, identities, or roles merge into a single individual. The understanding depends on many

components. According to Gadamer, the subjectivity is inevitable as the interpreter (the one, who interprets the history) is called to reflect on his own involvement in his age by ascribing to himself the projections of meaning – prejudices – caused by the encounter with the historical object [See: Gadamer 1975: 275].

The complexity of the research on the Soviet occupation period in the arts and related processes (such as institutional involvement, societal reactions, etc.) lies in the multi-layered, and not necessarily coherent, understandings, reception perspectives, and even paradigms represented, applied, and questioned by scholars of different generations and backgrounds. Sometimes, even in academic circles, the myth persists that first-hand experience of the Soviet period is necessary, claiming that only those who have lived through and coped with the “absurdities of the time” (i.e. social algorithms, subtexts, normalised double morality, and others) can provide the legitimate reflection and analysis. This is definitely false and has to do with the post-colonial or post-dependence specifics of knowledge and research traditions, often rooted in stagnant models of the Soviet period, where no alternatives to the single “truth” were accepted, impeding critical thinking and discourse-building around the facts and events of the time.

I would argue instead that the experience and education are what form understanding and attitude towards research questions and discourse; therefore, the critical issue here is the researcher’s self-awareness of being involved in the turmoil of relatively recent history to a certain degree depending on their age group and personal experience. Postcolonial studies help deal with the complexity of research challenges, but it is not a panacea as stated by acclaimed Estonian scholar Epp Annus discussing the necessary reduction of one single “total interpretative paradigm” (a typical approach of “one single truth” prevailing during Soviet times) and activation of “an effort in multidimensional critical thinking” [Annus 2018: 36]. In the academic polemic with Estonian historian Kaarel Pirimäe Annus specifies: “(...) postcolonial paradigms don’t have the closure of dogma [or they shouldn’t] and they require a responsible revision of each scholar according to the exigencies of the material at hand and the disposition of the scholar him- or herself” [Annus 2018a: 171] The perspective of the researcher is what matters the most as it forges the disposition and constructs the discourse according to the exigencies of material and perspective of the person working with the material.

Culture theorist Madina Tlostanova points out the problem of the coloniality of knowledge in a new discourse, referring to Russia and the post-Soviet territories, which were previously occupied and dominated by the Russian language and Soviet ideological framing in all possible fields, including research in the humanities and arts. The scholar distinguishes several generations of academics and concludes that even younger generations are oscillating between two colonialities of knowledge –

the stagnating post-dependence persists in thinking and the Western monopoly of knowledge production. Tlostanova writes:

“Freeing oneself from coloniality of knowledge is a long and painful process which requires learning to unlearn in order to relearn but on different grounds and sometimes actually creating and remaking these grounds (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012). Post-Soviet space and particularly Russia are not ready to discuss their own previous experience or today’s unfortunate condition other than in the forms of nostalgic lacquered Soviet myth (as we find in today’s propaganda, including its scholarly versions) or in the form of the no less simplified but negative anti-Soviet annihilation, unconditionally idealising the West. What is needed instead is an honest critical discourse which would be able to finally get rid of the intellectual dependency and the catching-up modus and start to develop its own knowledge about itself that would be original and vigorous enough not to be immediately racialised and subalternized in the global North.” [Tlostanova 2015: 50]

Even though Madina Tlostanova refers to the situation in the social sciences, the situation in art research, i.e. musicology, is similar. This brings us to the discourse problem in music history scholarship and research traditions established precisely during the Soviet period. Latvian musicology developed under the wing of Soviet musicology in the 1970s. According to musicologist Mārtiņš Boiko, Latvian musicology, during its institutionalisation in terms of transmission, methodology, and values, developed as a local branch of Russian musicology [Boiko 2004], which makes it part of the sovietisation process and therefore has long-lasting consequences for music criticism and research. Boiko argues that further evolution of musicology in Latvia happened in almost total isolation from the processes outside the Soviet Union and the difficulties Latvian musicologists faced in the late 1880s, 1990s and following decades after the collapse of the USSR and regaining of the independence derive directly from this isolation and former “license” to be ideologically and politically appropriate, selective and mostly biased [ibid.]. Considering the aforementioned, the research challenges related to the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s stem from a deficit in discourse and critical thinking for articulating the problem of intellectual dependency on the Soviet occupation in music and culture research. In the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the transition period remains a vast field to explore. Besides, the current educational system in Latvia keeps struggling with the coloniality of knowledge; therefore, several generations of scholars tend to have a hybrid base of knowledge and methodology floating between the Soviet and Western scholarly traditions and striving to establish that “honest critical discourse” mentioned by Madina Tlostanova. However, the awareness of

the necessity of decolonising knowledge and revising academic research traditions is a very recent trend in the humanities, especially in historical musicology.

Identifying and articulating my own challenges as an emerging scholar in my 40s has proven difficult. Compared with my elderly colleagues in music research, I am privileged to have been born in the late Soviet period, in 1981. This has placed me on a strange and paradoxical timeline: I was born in the 1980s, raised in the 1990s, and have made it to 2024. I have therefore lived through five different decades, two centuries and two millennia, and I am not even 50 yet. I had a happy Soviet childhood. Among other things, I got to wear the “Little Octobrist” pin badge for a couple of months at elementary school at the end of the 1980s. I swiftly replaced it with the Latvian national pin badge, *Auseklītis* (Morning Star), and was lucky enough to enjoy the company of two grandfathers who had returned from Siberian labour camps. Therefore, the idea of Lenin as the “grandfather of all Octobrists” did not resonate with me at all. I was raised during the period of “perestroika” (restructuring) and the National Awakening. I first learned to sing the anthem of the USSR in Latvian, which I believe was required in preschool, as well as the national anthem of the Republic of Latvia and other songs from the repertoire of what is known as the Singing Revolution of the 1990s. Recognising the complexity of these decades and the impossibility of a “single interpretative truth”, this article highlights a few research challenges in the field of musical theatre at the time, with the aim of contributing to a new discourse about the transition period for future generations. Building on the thesis previously advanced by Epp Annus and Madina Tlostanova, I have attempted to compile a list of the most significant research challenges in music theatre in Latvia during the 1980s and 1990s. This topic is of particular interest to me due to a project implemented by my academic institution. These include, but are not limited to the following:

- 1) limited sources of information;
- 2) methodological complexity and dynamic changes over a short period of time, and, last but not least,
- 3) research design and positioning, international compatibility of the results, motivational issues (who actually needs this and why?)

The late period of Soviet occupation and the beginning of independence were socially, economically, financially, and artistically complicated. Due to the proximity of the research period, the scholars experience several collateral effects related to each group of the aforementioned challenges. As my case study is closely related to the history of the Latvian National Opera, I focus on the above challenges based on my ongoing research.

The serious historiography of opera in Latvia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century culminates in the monograph *Latviešu operteātris* (*Latvian opera theatre*) by Vija Briede

[Briede 1987] followed by a handful of overviews in anniversary booklets of the Latvian National Opera, (the only opera house in the country since the 1950s), as well as some articles in the press or biographies of notable singers of the time. In 1995, a book compiling the experience stories of several Latvian opera singers of the 1990s was published by Silvija Līce [Līce 1995]. In the year 2000, a concise overview of the history of Latvian opera was provided in the book, which covered the story of the Latvian National Opera as an artistic institution (*Latvijas Nacionālā opera* 2000). In 2023, the musicologist Jānis Kudiņš published an extensive article that included the chronicle-catalogue of all finished and unfinished, staged and non-staged Latvian operas and related chamber opuses with brief descriptions. The catalogue comprised a total of 132 units composed by 30 September 2022 [Kudiņš 2023]. However, the history of opera and other musical theatre genres (including production, singers, social contexts, etc.) between the late 1980s and mid-1990s has yet to be satisfactorily addressed. The period of major repair works at the Latvian National Opera (1990–1995) is still referred to “the dark middle ages” due to the deficiencies in the compilation of relevant information, the paucity of extant written sources, and the incomplete nature of the photographic documentation, which is predominantly stored in personal archives., and the eye-witnesses who can offer first-hand accounts of the period are ageing, their memories are fading, and they are gradually passing away.

Additionally, a prevailing concern among contemporary and likely future researchers pertains to the questionable quality of published monographs and articles concerning the research period. As Latvian musicology as an academic discipline emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was rooted in Soviet musicology traditions, the texts were constructed according to the canon both in terms of content and style. The following two examples are offered in order to illustrate the problematic nature of the discourse:

- 1) “Latvian opera’s growth allowed it to conquer a considerable international level, which kept increasing gradually despite uneven developments. Today, [1987] our theatre is one of the typical academic opera houses focusing primarily on timeless world classics rather than experimental new works. However, since its inception, our theatre has explored the best examples of contemporary art. It is important to avoid the risk of becoming mired in tradition and conservatism, a pitfall that has been seen in several periods throughout the theatre’s history.” [Briede 1987: 203]<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter the quotes from Latvian sources are translated into English by the author.



- 2) “A. Viļumanis is a master of juicy contrasts in musicality and artistic style, with a keen sense of dramaturgy. Under his baton, our theatre performed at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow (1980), bringing great success to our opera troupe (...). After the period of A. Viļumanis as chief-conductor at our Opera house, now the climate is rather moderate. The leadership of conductor and composer Leons Amoliņš brought a few interesting ideas, but at the same time emphasised the soloists’ theatre. However, “one-star shows” of this kind could rarely save the artistically rough productions. Besides, the coming winds of [political] changes brought other emotions and issues to the Opera house.” [Fūrmane 200: 145]

Both authors of the quotes adhere to Soviet musicology, which is oriented towards praising stable traditions and public recognition primarily in the USSR (Moscow); however, the analysis of the socio-historical contexts and circumstances as well as a critical approach is lacking. While it is understandable in the case of the first author since all texts to be published in the mid-1980s had to pass censorship and receive the necessary approvals, the second author, writing in the late 1990s, most probably aimed to avoid detailed criticism because both of the conductors mentioned were still performing occasionally at the time and would probably have reacted negatively to any criticism published in the anniversary edition of Latvian National Opera.

The “wild” 1990s have left their mark on the history of Latvian music theatre with several significant decisions that contributed to the overall insecurity of all many communities involved in the industry. As for the documented history, it is rather fragmentary. The first half of the 1990s is partially covered by the memory book *Bez Baltā nama*<sup>2</sup> (*Without the White House*, 1995) by Silvija Līce [Līce 1995]. This compendium of interviews and memory stories uncovers the experiences of selected singers in the early 1990s. Many eyewitnesses of the time refer to this period as “a time of survival” or “a test of resistance” [ibid.: 18], when the considerable theatre troupe led the life of a travelling opera company based in a TV studio without heating. Performances, concerts, ballets and symphonic concerts took place

---

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘The White House’ may cause confusion in English. In Latvian, ‘Baltais nams’ is a poetic metaphor for the Latvian National Opera house, and also the actual name of the official residence of the President of the USA. The term was invented by Latvian opera tenor Mariss Vētra (1901, Tirza parish, Latvia – 1965, Toronto, Canada), who wrote extensive biographical prose covering the interwar period in Riga and Europe, as well as the singer’s life in exile after 1944. In his book *Mans Baltais nams* [Vētra 1954/1991], he refers to the Latvian National Opera as “my White House”. In the title of her book, Silvija Līce refers to this metaphor, describing the period of fundamental reconstruction works (1991–1995) as “years without the White House”.

in St Peter's Church, the Daile Theatre, the Operetta theatre, the Congress House and other venues. The Opera archive contains the testimonies of Latvian singers who toured the USA in 1991 (soprano Inessa Galante, tenor Kārlis Zariņš, bass Aivars Krancmanis, and concertmaster Māris Skuja). There are also accounts of guest performances in Germany in 1991 and 1993, and in Spain in 1995, curated by Ieva Plaude. She was the entrepreneur who curated the Latvian art exhibition in Berlin in 1988, as well as the producer of the opera festival in Dreieich, near Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in 1991 and 1992. Some memories are documented here:

"In Dreieich, a small German town no larger than Jelgava, our opera singers performed for two consecutive summers. The audience was particularly impressed by Inessa Galante's extraordinary interpretation of the role of Mikaela in *Carmen* in 1991, which brought the Latvian soprano her first international recognition." [Līce 1995: 16]

Insufficient experience of the practices and rules of the European opera industry, including discussions about the terms and conditions of guest performance contracts, often caused misunderstandings and led to the unfavourable conditions for Latvian artists [Līce 1995: 17]. Radio journalist Ināra Ancāne spent a week travelling with artists from the Latvian National Opera who were performing *Carmen*, *Norma* and *La Traviata*:

"The artists do not feel satisfied with these guest performances in Spain as they feel they do not recognise their professionalism and skills. The Spanish work organisation and planning were a total mess. Almost every day, a group of 140 people got on buses to travel 200 to 800 km on the beautiful but winding Spanish roads. They performed every evening. The show started at 9 or 10 pm and ended about 1 or 2 am. After the performance, they were taken by the same buses to the hotel located in another town. They only got to bed around 3 or 4 am, having been instructed to have breakfast at 8 am in order to depart for the next place (...). The stages differed and many of them were disappointing. We were told that those were not the real Spanish theatres typical of this culture. But our artists mostly performed in these old, abandoned cinemas. Of course, there were also a few great theatres with appropriate stages in Madrid, Zaragoza, etc., but these were the exception." [Līce 1995: 17]

Nevertheless, when asked about these guest performances in 2024/2025 (approximately 30 years after the events), most respondents recalled them as a positive experience abroad. For many of them, travelling outside the USSR and "friendly" countries to Southern Europe was an unusual experience. This situation illustrates the distortions of memory that make researchers' work particularly challenging,

given the limited published sources about the 1990s. Mostly, the only available sources are printed copies of programmes and flyers of guest performances abroad, a few press reviews (if collected as physical copies and deposited in the Latvian music archives, such as the Latvian National Museum of Literature and Music) and the slightly faded memories of participants who experienced the events first-hand.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and under different political regimes, opera was considered a representative art. Therefore, the Opera and Ballet Theatre of the SSR of Latvia (1944–1989) and the Latvian National Opera (1989–2015) had a somewhat special status among other theatres and in society. However, it was not the only stage for music theatre. Based on the Workers' Theatre, which was established by the Central Council of the Trade Unions, the State Theatre of Musical Comedy was developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This theatre was later known as the State Riga Operetta Theatre (1963–1992) and the Riga Musical Theatre (1992–1995). It is referred to hereinafter as the Operetta Theatre. The Operetta Theatre was a popular venue for working-class musical entertainment, particularly from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, as it maintained high artistic standards in terms of musical interpretation and ballet. The theatre hosted Latvian and Russian singing troupes that performed different repertoires simultaneously and toured the Soviet Union, with guest performances during the summer. However, at the end of the 1980s, the popularity of the genre declined for various reasons. The “perestroika” in the USSR and the emerging National Awakening movement stole the spotlight. The financial crisis impacted the purchasing power and choices of the audience. The history of the Operetta Theatre at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s remains a sensitive subject due to the administrative and financial crisis that led to its closure in 1995. The only published source that documents, to some extent, the history of the theatre is the memoirs of the former artistic director and chief conductor Jānis Kaijaks (1931–1991), titled *A little bit about myself and the Operetta Theatre* (*Mazliet par sevi un operetes teātri*). However, the book lacks precise references for quotes, and the tone of the text is auto-reflective, selective, and subjective, particularly in its interpretation of the facts and events of the time related to the planned liquidation of the Operetta Theatre [Kaijaks 2007: 185]. Methodologically, this memoir can be used as a source only when compared with the archive files and documents, which takes a lot of time. The story of the Operetta Theatre deserves a separate article and will be part of larger research in the near future.

In the transition period between 1988 and 1995, both the Latvian National Opera and the Operetta Theatre underwent a series of uneasy changes. The political situation was unstable and unpredictable, and the administration and artistic leadership changed year on year. Financial conditions were poor, the cooperation between the Ministry of Culture and the arts institutions was chaotic. The Latvian

National Opera House was under reconstruction; therefore, other venues were used for the performances and concerts. The documents of the time do not provide a complete overview of the processes; most of the written testimonies are incomplete and have not yet been digitised. Some of the personalities involved in decision-making at the time are currently acclaimed musicians of the older generation. Furthermore, the uncomfortable question of collaboration with “Cheka” curators via the KGB informant system by several leading personalities in the field of music theatre remains unanswered and often involves individuals of high professional standing and merit. In my research, I use structured interviews to gather the most complete information possible. However, a considerable share of crucial information has been disclosed to me as “off the record”.

All of the above leads to the third group of research challenges – the design of the research and the estimated results. Academic work ethics do not allow the disclosure of “off the record” information known to the researcher, creating a dilemma – either skip some important details and deliver incomplete research results, or betray the trust of the respondents. The anonymity of the respondents in this case does not help, because in specific situations, the deduction does not require much effort. I have concluded that at least some of the information currently gathered from eyewitnesses of the 1980s and 1990s regarding the activities and deeds of some of the key figures of the time should remain “off the record” for ethical reasons. This does not preclude the possibility of integrating it in later presentations and publications, providing the due comments and contexts according to the current state of affairs.

The international relevance of research into the culture, art and society of the late Soviet period, the transition period and the National Awakening in Latvia (or the Baltic States in general) is debatable. On the one hand, given the current geopolitical situation on the eastern border of the European Union, decolonisation topics (including the decolonisation of knowledge, research traditions and the activation of multidimensional critical thinking) seem important. On the other hand, the importance of decolonising knowledge and creating new critical discourse regarding the research period between the 1980s and 2000s is greater in the local academic environment and society. The above-listed research challenges in the context of music theatre research represent the common issues that should be addressed by every scholar working in the humanities, culture, and society.

In conclusion, there are a few points that academics specialising in the field of performing arts of the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could discuss further:

- 1) The fieldwork in music theatre proves that the previously collected and published information about the late Soviet period, the transitional period and the first years of the regained independence, as well as the personalities

and processes involved should be critically assessed and analysed in the context of specific socio-historical conditions. Due comment should be provided and all kinds of “self-evidences” derived from the personal experience of scholars or respondents should be avoided. It is essential to acknowledge the scholar’s perspective and position during the research period, especially when the scholar is a contemporary of the processes being examined.

- 2) It is essential to gather the testimonies and memories from people directly involved in the research field (in my case, opera, operetta, and music theatre) – including administration, artists, producers, organisers, public administration representatives (Ministry of Culture), etc. Despite the selectiveness and subjectivity of memories, the cross-referencing among contemporaries provides a more complete overview than published sources. Interviews are time-consuming and sometimes contain sensitive, personal, and even unflattering information about prominent figures in Latvian culture. The scholar’s challenge is to find an appropriate strategy to present the information without breaching ethical standards.
- 3) Scholars of different generations should work together and discuss differences in viewpoint, as well as potential prejudices and stereotypes related to the research period. Activating multidimensional critical thinking and articulating discourse problems can lead to productive cooperation and relevant research results despite the difficulties faced in the research process.

### Acknowledgements

The research was carried out within the project “Cultural and creative ecosystem of Latvia as a resource of resilience and sustainability” / CERS (No. VPP-MM-LKRVA-2023/1-0001), funded by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia in the framework of the State Research Programme Latvian Culture – a Resource for National Development (2023–2026). The State Research Programme is administered by the Latvian Council of Science.

### Sources

- Annus Epp (2018). *Soviet Postcolonial Studies. A View from Western Borderlands*. London and New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315226583>
- Annus Epp (2018a). Postcolonial cosmology or postcolonial critique? A response to Kaarel Piirimäe. In: *METHIS Studia humaniora Estonica*, December 2018. <https://doi.org/10.7592/methis.v17i21/22.14671>

- Boiko, M. (2004). Latviešu muzikoloģija/mūzikas zinātne. Vēsturiski kritisks pārskats. *Mūzikas akadēmijas raksti*, JVLMA. Available: [https://www.lmic.lv/uploads/kcfinder/files/M\\_BOIKO\\_MUZIKOLOGIJA%281%29.pdf](https://www.lmic.lv/uploads/kcfinder/files/M_BOIKO_MUZIKOLOGIJA%281%29.pdf)
- Briede, V. (1987). *Latviešu operteātris*. Rīga: Liesma.
- Gadamers, H. G. (1999). *Patiesība un metode* (tulk. I. Šuvajevs). Rīga: Jumava.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1975). *Truth and Method*. The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Kaijaks, J. (2007). *Mazliet par sevi un operetes teātri*. Rīga: Pētergailis.
- Kudiņš, J. (2023). Opera Latvijas Mūzikas vēsturē: periodizācija, faktoloģija, hronoloģija. *Mūzikas akadēmijas raksti XX*, 257–339, Available: <https://www.scriptamusica.lv/index.php/mar/article/view/10/10>
- Fūrmane, L. (2000). Opera. Četri vēstures loki teātrī. *Latvijas Nacionālā opera*. Aut. kol. Rīga: Mantojums.
- Līce, S. (1995). *Bez Baltā nama*. Rīga: Likteņstāsti.
- Tlostanova, Madina (2015). Can Post Soviet think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference. In: *Intersections*, No. 1 (2), June 2015. <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v1i2.38>