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SOVIET CULTURAL POLICIES IN LITHUANIA

Editorial Note

In Soviet society the creative individual works within a circumscribed field, defined by the "principles of socialist realism". In effect this means that art must serve society, specifically it must serve the purposes of the regime. The politicization of art forms imposes severe limits on the creative individual in the choice of content and means for his work and prostitutes the integrity of the artist and the search for truth and beauty. Nowhere is this evident as in the "open letter" of Jonas Jurašas, Senior Director in the Kaunas State Theater, to the Ministry of Culture of the Lithuanian SSR, the Kaunas State Theater, the Lithuanian Theater Society, and the Editors of Literatūra ir menas. Recently this dramatic protest against the bureaucratic interference with and control of the creative process reached the West and is reprinted here. Obviously, the "open letter" was not published in Lithuania. After this declaration of artistic independence, Jurašas was dismissed from his position as the Senior Director of the Kaunas State Theater.

The Soviet regime is "future oriented", especially in respect to the cultural heritage of the various nations in the Soviet Union (with the possible exception of the Russian nation). The assimilation's aspects of Soviet nationality policy tend to repress the cultivation and preservation of national culture and emphasize "internationalist" elements of culture. Although the Brezhnev-Kosygin regime has not engaged in direct de-nationalization of the various nationalities, nevertheless it has sanctioned and encouraged the indirect means of "growing together" of Soviet peoples. The Kremlin is not very anxious to permit the various nations a free hand in the cultivation of their national values. The preservation of the paintings by M. K. Čiurlionis is a case in point.

M. K. Čiurlionis (1874 -1911) is the most renown Lithuanian painter and composer, a pioneer in abstract painting. He is among the few Lithuanian creators who has been widely recognized beyond the borders of his native land. (Čiurlionis and his work is presented in a special issue of Lituanius, 1971, No.2; see also Juozas Pivoriūnas, "A Lithuanian Individualist: the Art of M. K. Čiurlionis", Lituanius, 1965, No. 4)- His works are considered among the most precious national treasures. Unfortunately, his paintings_ are deteriorating because of the inferior paper and paints used. There is a deeply felt concern that the treasures will soon rot away. However, the Lithuanian intelligentsia, even the Lithuanian communist regime, so far could not penetrate the walls of the Kremlin and receive permission to properly restore and preserve these national treasures. The case is illustrative of the so-called sovereignty of union republics, according to which the republic authorities cannot arrange on their own for a proper preservation of the most prized national values. Recently a group of Lithuanian intellectuals, especially painters of the younger generation, wrote a rather emotional appeal to the Lithuanians abroad to raise the question of preserving Čiurlionis' paintings for posterity. Evidently they hope that the publicity of the case will pressure Moscow and local bureaucrats to deal seriously with the problem. The translation of this appeal, which reached the West in late summer of 1972, is printed here.

I. LIMITS ON CREATIVE FREEDOM IN THE THEATER

AN OPEN LETTER TO SOVIET AUTHORITIES

After years of work in the theater, the necessity has matured to expound the accumulated thoughts concerning the principles of activity of the director as an artist and as a citizen.

Spiritual values are the only compensation of the creative individual to the society for the right to live in it. It would appear that the conditions for the creation here are favorable. What does the experience show? A number of productions staged by me, such as "The Warsaw Melody", "Tango", "The Hunt of the Mammoths", "Moliere", "Šventežeris", "House of Threat" received a lively attention of the public. "The Duel", "The Bolsheviks", "Mother's Field" were noted with diplomas and awards. The theater is implementing successfully the financial plans. Such a success could satisfy a director. However, what is hidden yonder?

Years of struggle for the right to stage a mature play. The unending disputes with cowardly bureaucrats in proving the importance of the production to the society. The purposeless expenditure of energy in self defense from demagogic attempts to perceive the intent of playwrights in the yet unstaged plays. The deformation of the texture of the work through categorical insistence on elimination of even essential accents. Finally, the limitation of exploitation of productions or even their complete prohibition, ignoring the opinion of the audience of the wide theatergoing public.

Out of the twelve productions, staged during five years, I could consider only three as more or less revealing my sense of the world. However, even these were seen by the spectator in a damaged version, with a loss of a substantial artistic impact. The finale of "Tango" was taken out, "The Hunt of the Mammoths" was abbreviated. Both productions were prohibited. And so many spectators did not see them. Especially important scenes of "The House of Threat" were cut out, the composition and finale were changed.

Compromise was the only way I could preserve to the audience my impaired stage productions. Compromises... They are convenient for occasional adherents who are searching for a quiet bay in artistic circles.

Is the spiritual comfort not a betrayal of artistic conscience? Does betrayal remain unrewarded?

On the road of compromises the artist is unaware how his spiritual resources are evaporating, how he *is* approaching degeneration.

That road is not for me.

I cannot accept truths, imposed from outside. In actualizing alien "truths", the artist becomes a stranger to himself. In isolating himself from his own micro-world, the creator loses the ties with the contemporary planet.

Through the creative work in the theater I want to express the spirit of the times, the complexity of human condition, its contradictions. The theater is my life and my passion, the meaning of existence. The theater is a tie, connecting me with the people. The theater is one of the most significant means in developing the motherland, it is a barometer, indicating her greatness and monopoly. A sensitive and purposeful theater, with all the diversity of styles and genres — from tragedy to vaudeville — can change the world view of the people in a few years. An impaired theater, with elevations instead of wings, can prostitute the entire nation.

The theater is a school of tears and laughter, an open forum in which the people can condemn an anachronistic and deceitful morality and with a living example to reveal the eternal principles of the heart and feelings.

A nation which does not contribute to the creation of a theater is either dead or in a stupor. However, if the theater, through laughter and tears, does not touch the pulse of society, its history, the drama of its people, the true colors of its landscape, if it does not express the national spirit, then it has no right to call itself a theater. It must be called a gambling casino or a place where "time is annihilated" shamelessly (F. Garcia Lorca).

I have devoted all my powers to make the theater the carrier of truth, goodness, and beauty. I sought to realize these ideals also in my last staging of the play "Barbora Radvilaitė". After great theatrical efforts a spectacle was born, which could have been significant in the life of our theater. However, it is not clear when the public will see it. Can it be that the fate of the earlier productions awaits "Barbora Radvilaitė"?

The viewer is the only evaluator of my artistic work. The freely evolving criteria should not be replaced by opinions formed in the stuffy hermetic offices (of bureaucrats).

So far I have sought, without receiving permission, to stage J. Anouilh's "Antigone", R. Hochhuth's "The Deputy", T. Rudzevich's "My Little Daughters", Marat's "Sade", L. Zorin's "Dion", and other plays. It was proposed to me to "select" works from plan lists, which do not correspond at all to my sense of the world.

Today I am being pained by the voice of unstaged and impaired works. The so-called success of individual productions is revolting me. Compromises, tactical cunning, senseless treading in the bureaucratic corridors, the degradation of human dignity, gloomy perspectives — all this forces me to resolve:

— After long deliberations I begin with the refusal to change anything in completed productions;

— I refuse to buy the hope of producing mature works with the price of occasional productions;

— I recognize only those criteria for evaluation of creative works which are born in the sharp struggle of opinions;

— I create according to the command of the conscience of an artist and a citizen.

Jonas Jurašas
Senior Director of Kaunas State Theater

Kaunas, August 16, 1972.

II. IMPEDIMENTS TO PRESERVATION OF NATIONAL HERITAGE

AN APPEAL OF LITHUANIAN INTELLECTUALS ON PRESERVATION OF PAINTINGS BY M. K. ČIURLIONIS

With a great emotional uplift the Lithuanians in the entire world are preparing to meet the 100th anniversary since the birth of M. K. Čiurlionis, the genius of their nation, the great artist and at the same time one of the brightest minds of mankind. Recently a news item appeared in the press of Lithuania: the East German publisher "Verlag der Kunst" is preparing to publish a monograph on M. K. Čiurlionis, only in the German language, however. Besides, only a fourth of the illustrations will be in color. Soon it will be a year since the formation of a committee in Lithuania to prepare for the jubilee. However, so far nothing is yet known that finally the Lithuanian nation will appropriately honor her own Čiurlionis.

Where is the competition to design a monument for the truly deserving genial artist. Where are at least the promises that finally a monograph on the work of M. K. Čiurlionis will be published in the *Lithuanian language* with quality color reproductions of *all* the works of M. K. Čiurlionis. After all, the great artist painted on an inferior paper with paints of short duration and his paintings are rapidly aging. If on the occasion of the centennial quality reproductions are not produced, the paintings may not survive till the next anniversary... Is it sufficient to be satisfied with uncertain possibilities for restoration? Finally, what if some natural disaster or war occurred? There is only one Čiurlionis!

The newspapers of Lithuania ("Tiesa", "Literatūra ir menas", "Gimtasis kraštas" and others), as well as public agencies (the Ministry of Culture and others) often receive letters from citizens, asking what is being done to preserve and to honor the work of M. K. Čiurlionis. The results of "internal pressure" so far are meager...

In the turmoil of history we became accustomed to be careful, sceptical, angry. It is said that we are slow, stubborn northerners. It is said that we are culturally behind the world. However, one wonders whose fault it is that we are incapable of demonstrating to the world what we can: whether our Lithuanian backwardness must be tied to the pole of shame or only the various circumstantial obstacles? It is strange, but many Lithuanians have greater expectations of seeing a monument to Gediminas, Kudirka, Basanavičius, Baranauskas, Maironis, Čiurlionis somewhere in Chicago, rather than in Lithuania, in the central (or peripheral) squares of Vilnius.

Yes, we are telling the truth: after many years we would like to visit good old Chicago, which has become a mother to many Lithuanians, and to see there what a Lithuanian can do, to see how he loves his native land — such a small and pure as a tear drop on the face of God...

No, we are not traitors, enemies of the nation. We want Gediminas in Vilnius, Maironis in Kaunas, Basanavičius in Anykščiai. However, experience has shown that when our brothers, living under foreign skies, take initiative, a movement arises also among the thick-skulled bureaucrats.

We must remember and we do remember: many noted people lived in Lithuania, who loved dearly the Motherland and who gave her everything. We want to honor them, disregarding all conditions and difficulties — economic or other. Only a man, honoring the past, is a man. Only a man, loving his native land, is a man. Only a man, having faith in his people, in his nation, seeking for her a brighter tomorrow, is a man.

The future is impossible without culture, without spiritual life, without that which is more valuable than money, government, and all circumstances. We believe in our nation, her vitality, which was confirmed by history. We believe in the higher ideals, goodness and beauty, finally God himself. We also believe this, that the Lithuanians in the entire world will do everything in order to safeguard and appropriately honor the cultural heritage of the small, but creative and dear nation of ours, that everything will be done — in Lithuania and elsewhere — to demonstrate to the world through Lithuanian perseverance and diligence the spiritual strength and beauty of our nation.

We must remember and we do remember that Lithuania has ancient cultural traditions, only they were suffocated for centuries by many covetous neighbors... During the brief rebirth of two decades a giant forward leap was made (though we do not negate the shortcomings of the past). The contemporary cultural achievement of Lithuania should not be negated either. However...

We hope that perhaps folios of color reproductions of M. K. Čiurlionis' paintings, published in world renown houses, will also reach us in Lithuania. Perhaps some day we will not have to worry that the colors of some paintings still have not been preserved for ages.

Čiurlionis is alive and will live forever because his spirit is in us, in the nation of Čiurlionis. We shall never permit the eternal flame of art to flicker out.