



Exploring New Territories, Creating New Languages: Theater in Lithuania and Latvia after the Turn of the Millenium

VALDA ČAKARE

VALDA ČAKARE is a theater critic and professor of theater studies living in Riga, where she teaches at the Latvian Academy of Culture. Her areas of specialization are twentieth century theater, performance theory, and theater semiotics.

Abstract

My investigation focuses on the ways Lithuanian and Latvian directors create stage reality and negotiate history, present experiences, and future possibilities. Drawing on two productions, one by Rimas Tuminas (2001) and the other by Alvis Hermanis (2002), I proceed from the observation that, even though both theater cultures have developed similar staging strategies, Lithuanian and Latvian theaters differ because of historical conditions. I clarify how these differences, which manifest themselves in the choice of themes, the treatment of identity issues, and attempts to answer essential questions about human existence, have contributed to the artistic purpose and the dynamics of Lithuanian and Latvian theater.

Before the turn of the twenty-first century, one of the most exciting experiences for Latvian theatergoers and critics was regular pilgrimages to Lithuania. But despite the fact that, by the end of the last decade of the twentieth century, Latvian theaters seemed to have recovered from the deep economic and spiritual crisis that had emptied the auditoriums between 1991 and 1993, the viability of new artistic ideas was still fairly small. Unlike Latvia, Lithuania achieved a reputation as a country where theater thrives. Lithuanian stage directors had courage and an interest in analyzing sociocultural processes, reexamining national narratives and myths, challenging the existing modes of representation, and developing new staging strategies.

The idea of the stage director as auteur, the primary author of a performance, which appeared at the very beginnings of the modern tradition of directing, was successfully implemented by the best Lithuanian stage directors across generations: Eimuntas Nekrošius, Jonas Vaitkus, Rimas Tuminas, Oskaras Koršunovas, Gintaras Varnas, and Cezaris Graužinis.

It was Eimuntas Nekrošius whose productions attracted particular attention from Latvian audiences beginning in the 1980s. Nekrošius offered a highly emotional and visual theater, grounded in a series of powerful images and concentrated on the universal themes of life and death. He succeeded in creating visual and verbal metaphors that were evocative of Lithuanian culture and his personal experience, but also accessible to culturally diverse audiences. Nekrošius's art inspired multiple interpretations and was widely discussed in the Latvian theater press.

It has been noted by Latvian theater scholars that Nekrošius draws on four main sources: the harmonious universalism of a world outlook based on Lithuanian folklore and mythology, which makes his productions abound in folkloric and mythological symbols that contain globally-valid meanings; Catholic mysticism, with its belief in eternal life and resurrection of the soul; Russian culture, the influence of which can be traced in two aspects – his excellent knowledge of Russian literature, resulting in original metaphysical interpretations, and a combination of Stanislavskyan psychological realism with Meyerhold's and Vakhtangov's use of the grotesque in actors' work; and Polish culture – like the Polish romanticists, Nekrošius pays attention to dreams or premonitions and makes use of the form of the mystery play.¹

However, alongside the theater scholars' focus on performance style and its relation to national and globally valid themes, there exists a popular view that the power and self-sufficiency of Nekrošius's art (in a broader sense – all Lithuanian

theater, which Nekrošius stood for) was due, to a certain extent, to Lithuania's heroic past. Mindaugas, the medieval unifier of feudal Lithuania, established a strong centrally-governed state capable of fighting off Teutonic invaders in the early thirteenth century, and Lithuania retained its independence. To underscore, this view contained a hint that Latvia lacked the experience of being a powerful state, and that was one reason why it had not been able to establish a tradition of an influential stage director and evolve an original style of directing in the theater arts.

The turn of the millennium gave Latvian theater an added charge of energy. First, Alvis Hermanis, the artistic director

1 Radzobe, "Eimunts Nekrošus," 580. 26 of the New Riga Theater, came to international notice, and the opportunity to share their national identity in an international arena augmented the self-esteem of the Latvians. Second, a new generation of directors entered the Latvian theaters.

At the core of Hermanis's success was an understanding of the manner in which theater makes an impact on the audience. Hermanis's performances could be perceived as stories about people's lives. However, they could also be perceived as stories about the theater, since the director was more interested, not in people's lives as such, but in how and from what these lives were constructed in the theater. Hermanis did not pretend that his performances were pieces of reality; he did not hide behind the "fourth wall," as if there were no spectators in the theater. The director made spectators look at themselves while watching the performance, or remember something that had never happened. In Hermanis's performances, actors filled the space with fictitious characters and events from both collective memories about the past and the lyrics of songs and films; there were also elements, *mise-en-scènes*, and props taken from the director's former productions. Under the cover of anthropological experiments, Hermanis obviously did what he liked best – studied theater resources. This study often resulted in a combination of seemingly incompatible features – the psychologism akin to Stanislavsky, based on the actors' emotional memory and striving for authenticity of environment; emphatic theatricality, with the characteristic rejection of the fourth wall in the style of Brecht; and Artaud's suggestive impact on the individual and collective subconscious of the spectators.

As to the young directors, they were free from biases with regard to the diverse forms of theater funding and management in conditions of economic globalization, and – equally important – they gave preference to the freedom of artistic expression and experiment rather than the security provided by a repertory theater subsidized by the state. Mārtiņš Eihe, one of the most talented graduates of the Latvian Academy of Culture, was welcomed as a director in several repertory theaters, but after working in Liepāja and Valmiera for a short period of time, he set up his own project and called it NoMadl. As the title – which can be read both as *nomadi* (nomads) and "I am not mad" – implies, the content of the project means "wandering in the fields of culture" – producing theater performances, film shows, and exhibitions. Apart from that, Mārtiņš Eihe continued staging performances at independent theaters, such as Dirty Deal Teatro and Ģertrūde Street Theater, or accepted the invitations of repertory theaters to cooperate with them as a guest director.

Latvian theater makers seemed to have caught up with Lithuanian theater in terms of artistic expression as well. Jurgita Staniškytė points out that the emerging "new language" of contemporary Lithuanian theater is closely linked with its selfreflexive character, the redefinition of the role of text in the performance, and the use of the actor's body as a culturally coded sign.² In general, the same could be said about Latvian theater. However, it might be interesting to recognize that, despite the fact that the stage directors of Lithuania and Latvia share common modes of expression and representational devices conditioned by a similar socioeconomic situation, the hegemonic values of Lithuanian and Latvian theater differ.

This statement can be exemplified by two interpretations of Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, which premiered within an interval of one year – a production by Rimas Tuminas at Vilnius Small Theater in 2001 and Alvis Hermanis's version at the New Riga Theater in 2002. In May 2002, during the Days of Lithuanian Culture in Riga, both readings of the play were performed on the premises of the New Riga Theater. Setting them side by side in time and space produced a remarkable effect, since preconditions were created, not only for the examination of similarities and differences of two novel *mise-en-scènes*, but also for the reconsideration of the dominating aesthetic and ideological views of the two theater cultures.

It was obvious that in terms of the world scene, both productions form an emblematic pair: the vast, eternal, vertical dimension of the Lithuanian performance as opposed to the spatially limited, mundane, horizontal aspect prevailing in the Latvian version.

In the Lithuanian production, the space is open. Beams of light slowly make dust glitter in the black above the stage. In the opening scene, the stage is immersed in darkness, while the actors, as the citizens of town N. wrapped in fur coats, are shifting from one foot to the other in the middle of nowhere. Whatever this place is, it has been deserted by God. It is a world in deadlock, struck by crisis. The vast open space creates a feeling of permanent danger, as if we were on a battlefield where a fight with an enemy or natural forces is expected. Or else the stage evokes associations with a way station or a crossroad – a place of passage to sacred space, evoking the significance of the ancient tradition of placing altars or funeral urns at crossroads. The set designer, Adomas Jacovskis, emphasizes the presence of the sacred element by marking two vertical lines in the otherwise empty space – a solitary milestone on the left side of the stage and a church tower in the background. The vertical dimension is also accentuated by the stylizations of orthodox chants composed by Faustas Latėnas. They rise and solemnly fill the space to evaporate into the universe.

The aesthetics of Hermanis's production brings up associations with the New Objectivism of the 1930s. Contrary to the early forms of modernism, which rejected the genuineness of the real world and were looking for more unreal ways of showing the true, genuine world, New Objectivism dealt with the depiction of the real world, emphasizing its fictitiousness, i.e., depicting unreal things exactly according to the pattern of real objects. Hence the emphatic realism: concentrated colors, plastic expressiveness, and an exaggeratedly careful reproduction of details.

The environment is precise to the degree of being grotesque: the kitchen of a Soviet canteen with rattling cash registers, abacuses, greasy aluminum spoons, ugly blue walls, the smell of onion, and fat-upholstered cooks with ruddy faces; a latrine with dilapidated walls; a shabby hotel room with the tapestry depicting Shishkin's irksome bears on the wall. In Hermanis's production, the closed space helps the citizens of town N. maintain the unity of a corrupt society. It creates a refuge, an island of safety that can be threatened only by evil news from the outside.

The inhabitants of town N. are presented as butterballs, muffled in layers of porolone,³ their physical thickness making their mental obesity visible. The polyurethane coat of fat is the body of the character the actor's body is wrapped in. To a certain extent, Hermanis has created a visual inversion of the definition of theater proposed by Eric Bentley: a situation is theatrical if A pretends to be B and C looks on.⁴ Here, C looks at A, but sees B. The actor's body becomes transparent and allows the audience to see the body of the character portrayed. However, in *The Government Inspector*, the audience's attention is focused on the compound nature of the actor's body (animate + inorganic, synthetic); the image of the body is a rejection of the ideal body. The narrow-minded potbellies wrapped up in porolone flesh, which visualizes mental obesity, are extremely satisfied with their lives. They move to and fro between a canteen and a lavatory, and control the situation along this route perfectly. The prospect of losing their welfare is certainly frightening, but the fear can be mastered if one takes action and outpaces the course of events.

In the Lithuanian production, fear has quite a metaphysical character. The citizens are reminiscent of a monolithic group of comrades-in-arms who stand shoulder to shoulder facing an invisible enemy. They are waiting for the government inspector as the big unknown; like archaic societies, they attribute evil of a mysterious origin to the notion of "the Other." The behavior of the citizens indicates that metaphysical fear is not only caused by darkness; it creates darkness by itself. Cause and effect exchange places – it is not danger that arouses fear; it is fear that evokes danger. The object of fear is formed by gossip and anonymous rumors, which make the atmosphere of fear possible. Tuminas portrays a dismal and aggressive community that shapes their morbid dread by detecting dissidents and taking the law in their own hands.

The hotel staff is careless in rendering service to the inspector? – the heads of the negligent employees are immediately cut off with a giant axe. Who was the first to spread the rumor that Khlestakov is a government inspector? Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky? – the perpetrators are dragged to the scaffold without delay. Tuminas does not politicize specifically, although it is possible to recognize a reference to the political persecution of citizens carried out by authorities in the Soviet era. The director's main concern is the very mechanism of creating an atmosphere of overwhelming fear. His focus on the plight of the individual, as well as the whole community, in very specific circumstances evokes particular meaning, not only regionally, within post-Soviet countries, but within the broader human dimension as well.

The vengeance that befalls the citizens for their sins is also essentially different in both productions. In the Latvian version, they prepare their own downfall by finding a suitable candidate and making him blossom as a first-rate inspector in their own fashion. Throughout the performance, two live hens and a rooster make a constant bustle downstage. They draw attention to the unmistakable similarity between the fat citizens and the birds that would never overtop their given perch in the henhouse. After falling into the hands of the fatties, Khlestakov acquires their habits and lifestyle, and this change is reflected in his visual image. At the finale of the play, he returns as a true government inspector, wearing the mask of a rooster and ready to hold his schoolmasters up to ridicule.

In the Lithuanian version, the citizens are punished by an unearthly power. Khlestakov arrives in town N. from some unknown place. He appears on stage on top of an iron bunk bed of strange construction, dragged by his servant Osip. There he squats in his long white shirt, trembling and gripping a bowl of watery soup in his hands. When the fatal mistake of the citizens comes to light, Tuminas strikes them with a deluge – water starts pouring down from above, and everyone seeks refuge on an improvised float made by pushing stools together. The stools, however, are soon transformed into a scaffold for the execution of the perpetrators. The small church Bobchinsky attempted to erect from white bricks, with an onion for a cupola, falls to pieces; whereas the big temple starts to sway and finally begins to dance. Unlike Hermanis, Tuminas succeeds in revealing the phantasmagoric dimension of Gogol's play – with the mysteriously deterrent atmosphere, with a puppet that starts wriggling in a clownish dance when Khlestakov leaves, and with the apocalypse at the end of the performance.

Alongside the many differences, there is one aspect in which Hermanis and Tuminas think alike. Both of them interpret Khlestakov as an infantile creature, an unprotected scared child who is longing to return to the womb. In Hermanis's production, Vilis Daudziņš's meager Khlestakov, dotted with pubescent pimples, seeks shelter with Andris Keišs's stately Osip, who dandles Khlestakov on his knee like a baby. In Tuminas's version, Arūnas Sakalauskas's Khlestakov feels as ill at ease as a boy who has to recite a poem standing in front of the Christmas tree, but cannot remember the text. The repertoire of Arūnas Sakalauskas's means of expression is surprisingly vast. However, there is one characteristic gesture among them that designates a range of contradictory feelings. Every now and then, Khlestakov draws a huge circle in the

air, as if marking out the line of a nonexistent belly or demonstrating something big and bulky. This is what fishermen or hunters do when they tell tall stories, knowing that no one is going to believe them.

It seems that both directors make Khlestakov look childish for more than just the sake of contrast, to emphasize the blindness and narrow mindedness of those waiting for the government inspector. A character may signify many different things: death, a just sentence, or something as capacious as Becket's Godot. In both productions, a community overpowered by fear selects the most unprotected individuals from among their members to raise them to the position of the enemy. A child is a very appropriate candidate for this purpose. At the same time, a child designates the future of the community. In the Latvian production, this future repeats the past; in the Lithuanian version, it brings about the apocalypse.

Both Hermanis and Tuminas have staged *The Government Inspector* as a tragicomedy, but there is more comedy than tragedy in Hermanis's production, and more tragedy than comedy in Tuminas's. The verticality of the Lithuanian production virtually meets the horizontality of the Latvian performance, creating a point of intersection – a symbolic equivalent to the reality of crucifixion, which is emblematic of suffering and the promise of resurrection.

So far, the examples discussed focus on two particular productions and the distinctive style of their directors. However, beyond these very concrete instances, there is an urge to find some essential quality of expression characteristic of Lithuanian and Latvian theater generally. The ten years that have passed since the two productions of *The Government Inspector* testify to the fact that both theaters have undergone considerable change, developing local versions of contemporary cultural forms. The paradigm shifts that started in the last decades of the twentieth century have developed a theater that is much more self-conscious, drawing attention to the constructedness of the theatrical performance, utilizing images and techniques that are unexpected and innovative, and delighting in the eclectic. Both Latvian and Lithuanian stage directors are aware of what E. Fischer-Lichte calls the transformative power of performance: theater's potential community building power – the creation of a community out of actors and spectators based on their physical copresence.⁵ According to E. Fischer-Lichte, it plays a key role in generating the feedback loop.

To this end, a variety of strategies have been developed. To give but one example, a particular spatial arrangement may be used in different ways to release unifying energies. In *Atviras ratas* (*The Open Circle*) by Aidas Giniotis and *Jūlijas jaunkundze* (*Miss Julie*) by Vladislavs Nastavševs, the acting space is an arena surrounded by the seats of the audience. In *Atviras ratas*, the actors use the performance area as a memory space; they fill it with images from their biographical stories, encouraging the spectators to link what they see to what they themselves have seen and done. In *Jūlijas jaunkundze*, the playing area is used as a battlefield. The actors' stage behavior is extremely physical and aggressive, the tensions and relaxations that compose their motion, kinesthetically, make the spectators' bodies feel what the actors' bodies are feeling, thus uniting both actors and spectators in the experience of fundamental human emotions.

However, the dominating mood of the community based on bodily copresence continues to differ in Lithuania and Latvia. In the Latvian productions, renegotiating the relationship with memory and the past is characterized not only by a selfironical shattering of cultural myths, but, first and foremost, by a particular nostalgia for lost cultural integrity, stable sources of identity, and the system of values and order within which human life acquires meaning. Nostalgia overshadows even those performances that attempt to establish a strong presentday perspective by reflecting today's fragmented and constantly changing world. An example is *Melnais piens* (*Black Milk*), Hermanis's apocalypse, where vanishing rural life stands for a cosmos that turns into chaos.

Melnais piens is a devised performance based on the stories of real people and structured as a journey into the past. Six actresses and one actor alternately represent their own selves and fictitious characters – either human beings, or cows and a bull. This is not a random choice: in Latvian folklore, the cow is associated with the gentleness of a mother's care and life-giving milk. Broadly speaking, the image of the cow helps Hermanis shape the contours of Latvian identity, which is threatened by globalization. The white wholesome milk has turned black. Black means decay and pollution, and moreover, encompasses the terrors of nonexistence. The old homesteads are disappearing; there are almost no people left; the cows are slaughtered. Step by step, the performance develops into a metaphor for a dissolving human society.

Lithuanian theater seems to deal with similar problems and use similar staging strategies. The story Oskaras Koršunovas evolves in his interpretation of Marius Ivaškevičius's *Išvarymas* (*Expulsion*) – a play depicting the life of Lithuanian economic emigrants in London – is no less cruel than that created by Hermanis, and the message of losing one's homeland is as painful as that of *Melnais piens*. However, images and techniques that have become a hallmark of Koršunovas's distinctive directing style – a fragmented structure, constant switching from the present to the past and the future, the expansion of space with the help of simultaneous actions and video projections, Brechtian comments and demonstrations of the constructedness of the stage reality, to mention just a few – contrary to the leading stage directors of Latvia, are not used to demonstrate and analyze the irreversible disintegration of the life of the nation, but to reevaluate contemporary experience and project the shape of a future society.

Notes:

1 Radzobe, "Eimunts Nekrošus," 580.

2 Staniškytė, "Rewriting the Theater Tradition," 83.

3 Ed. note: A laminated polyurethane film reinforced with textile.

4 Bentley, *The Life of the Drama*, 150.

5 Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 51.

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