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BALTIC THEATER 1995–2005: PROCESSES AND TRENDS

Guna Zeltina

During the decade from 1995 to 2005 theater in the Baltic region widened its repertory borders, created a new system of management and renewed its artistic language. It lost its ideological significance and intellectual leadership. The new system of contracts gave more freedom to theater managers in changing the inner structure of theaters, and in forming smaller and more dynamic theater companies. The self-identifying process appeared in all three Baltic theaters, as seen in such productions as Alvis Hermanis's *Latvian Stories* (2004), Priit Pedajas' performance of Andres Kivirahk's *Estonian Funeral* (2002) and Rimas Tuminas' production of Marius Ivaškevičius' *Madagaskaras* (2004).

Keywords: theater; drama; performance; director; post-dramatic

This article presents an overview of general processes and trends in Baltic theater during the decade 1995–2005. How did the theater change in the new, expanded social and cultural space? Does it still possess ideological power? Is it a national museum or an important part of living culture? Discussion of these questions clarifies the most relevant changes in Baltic theater during this period.

The social and political backgrounds and latest developments in Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian theaters are similar to those of the other so-called 'post - Soviet' or Eastern-bloc countries. Under the communist regime the theater acted as a means of retaining national identity to a greater extent than any other field of art. With its multi-dimensional character, the theater provided one of the few opportunities for intellectual resistance. It earned immense popularity as a result. The restoration of political independence and expansion of the Baltic regional borders changed the theatrical situation in respect to many fields of life and culture.

First, theater in this region lost its role of ideological opponent as well as its previous ideological significance and intellectual leadership. It is now equal to other

fields of art. It pursued a mission of intellectual resistance to the newly established pragmatic consumer society. After the great confusion of the early 1990s, the theater developed its aesthetic potential, widened its repertoire and creative limits, and established a new system of management.

Second, theater became as diverse as society. The theatrical community is divided into two parts. On the one hand, leading Baltic theatrical directors and troupes gained an international reputation, carried out their projects, and gave guest performances in Europe, both in other theaters and at festivals. On the other hand, there are the traditional and *local* theaters. The differences between the international and local groups are noticeable in artistic quality, financial situation, repertoire, rehearsal periods, etc.

Third, for many Baltic theaters the problems of survival took precedence over creative issues, especially at the start of the decade. A new system of employment contracts gave more freedom to theater managers and provided a possibility to form smaller, dynamic, and more flexible theatrical companies. Agreements with actors and directors are renewed every season or every couple of seasons, instead of the previous system of open-ended agreements. Yet the traditional model of repertory theater came to dominate in all three countries. Only a few independent theatrical companies were established or survived during the decade. The traditional repertory theaters lost considerable state subsidies in comparison with the Soviet times. They also lost part of their audience because of rising ticket prices.

The severe economic situation led to the commercialization of the repertoire and language of theater, especially in the traditional segment of the Baltic theaters. The leading avant-garde and mainstream directors such as the Lithuanians Eimuntas Nekrošius, Rimas Tuminas, Oskaras Korsunovas, the Estonian Elmo Nüganen, the Latvian Alvis Hermanis and others found different funds and sponsors for their projects. Rather often these were from overseas. This possibility was rare for other theaters. The trend of commercialization was strong. It promotes the exploitation of artists instead of developing their creative potential.

The new situation of self-identification became acute. How could members of small nations identify themselves in the new European cultural space and in a permanently changing world? Are they individuals alienated from power and social mechanisms? Or are they socially responsible and spiritually active? Such questions characterize the processes and trends in the repertoire and aesthetics of the Baltic theater.

Changes were noticeable in the case of some directors. The Lithuanian theater displayed strong potential thanks to directors such as Jonas Vaitkus, Eimuntas Nekrošius, Rimas Tuminas and Oskaras Korsunovas, who remain the greatest authorities among the Baltic countries. Korsunovas is the youngest among them. He began his theater career at the start of the 1990s and joined the group of leaders quickly. The experienced Estonian directors Priit Pedajas and Elmo Nüganen remained in the mainstream, while their younger compatriots Jaanus Rohumaa and Tiit Ojaso have made the theatrical process more dynamic. Latvian theater has a lot of really good local directors such as Mara Kimele, Mikhail Gruzlov and others, but only Alvis Hermanis (b. 1965) established an international reputation. He joined the group of leading Baltic directors. His first productions, such as *Marquise de Sade* by Yukio

Mishima (1993) and others in the New Riga Theater, were complicated audio-visual collages of diverse aesthetic principles and images from Eastern and Western cultures, often in a post-modern style. In the early to mid-1990s, he and other Baltic directors had to follow global theatrical trends. They needed to prove to themselves and to others that they are a part of Europe and European culture. At the beginning of the new century, anti-globalization became a formative principle in the content and aesthetics of Alvis Hermanis and other Baltic directors.

One general tendency remained strong in the theaters of all three countries. They reflected current situations and problems through a personal vision of the world's classics. Interpretations of the same classical play change in the experience of different Baltic directors using different philosophical, ethical and aesthetic approaches. Eimuntas Nekrošius' trilogy of the Shakespearean plays *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello* presented the power of his famous metaphorical theater with gloomy and apocalyptic symbols. The same tone and atmosphere dominated Elmo Nüganen's interpretation of *Hamlet* with its synthesis of psychological and visual theater. Rimas Tuminas' allegorical production of Nikolay Gogol's play *The Inspector General* was set in an abandoned, miserable provincial town, forgotten by God and people. Alvis Hermanis' vision of the same Gogol play was realized in a crowded Soviet-era canteen with its large kitchen. It mixed the socially grotesque with nuanced psychological theater. Oskaras Korsunovas's version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* took place in a 1960s pizzeria. The cinematic aesthetics of that period created a playful and dynamic atmosphere. Tiit Ojaso's *Juliet* used the same Shakespearean material for a post-modern collage that unites Elizabethan theatrical style with contemporary parodies. All these productions present a variety of styles and methods. They include psychological theater as well as post-modern and post-post-modern approaches.

Problems of the contemporary world and society were reflected in performances of new contemporary foreign drama. On a positive note, the path for new drama from abroad to the stages of the Baltic became shorter than in previous times. Behind the Iron Curtain, it sometimes took decades for modern Western plays to reach Baltic stages. Today, it happens in a couple of years or sooner. The plays of Martin Macdonagh, Eric Emmanuel Schmidt and others are staged quickly. There are no more ideological restrictions, and Baltic directors have absolute freedom with their repertoires. New problems, however, became apparent. Copyright royalties limited the choice of foreign plays, which was often arbitrary and did not reflect the actual process in world drama and theater.

Previously the national classics served as sources for Baltic national dignity and intellectual resistance. This changed during the 1990s. Instead of stressing the ideological aspect, the theater concentrated on philosophical and ethical qualities of these same works. Eimuntas Nekrošius staged the Lithuanian epic poem *The Seasons*, written by the eighteenth-century Lutheran pastor Kristijonas Donelaitis. He filled the material with memories of his own childhood from the countryside. Village work and festivals were seen to reflect organic ties and the unity of nature and people. The young Latvian director Galina Polishchuka in her production of Janis Rainis' classic play *Blow, Wind!* transformed the main stage of the Latvian National Theater into an ethnographic museum. A group of young people – actors and ethno-musicians – entered dressed in ancient clothes, with old tools for farm work. They acted the

seasonal cycle of village work. The 1914 play does not contain such elements. At the turn of the current century, the young director highlighted this as a lost value. It became a vehicle for resurrecting traditional forms of theater and drama. The trend of anti-globalization is also noticeable in other performances.

The quest for new identities in contemporary national drama was closely linked with the phenomena of rewriting and reconsidering national history. It was realized in plays such as *The Kid* by Lithuanian author Marius Ivaškevičius, which is written in both Lithuanian and Russian. The young playwright analyzed the post-war years and Stalinist deportations to Siberia. The same theme emerged in Latvian author Lauris Gundars' work *Touching the White Bear*. In Estonia, five national playwrights from 76-year-old Madis Koiv to 29-year-old Urmas Lennuk staged frequent productions, in contrast to the situation with national drama in the other Baltic countries. In Lithuania only two promising names appeared during the decade in question: Marius Ivaškevičius (b. 1973) and Laura Sintija Černiauskaite (b. 1976). The latter's play *Lucy is Skating* won the main prize at the Berlin *Theatertreffen* in 2004. The Lithuanian critic Vaidas Jauniškis noted that almost all directors turned their back on young playwrights and chose instead to stage Shakespeare or Chekhov for the third or fifth time per season (Jauniskis 2005). A similar skepticism towards the new national drama could be discerned in Latvia. There only two promising authors, Inga Abele (b. 1972) and Evita Sniedze (b. 1974), appeared during the period in question. Nevertheless, the importance of contemporary national drama, especially in the process of self-identification, can hardly be disputed.

Andrus Kivirähk (b. 1970) is one of the five aforementioned Estonian playwrights. He is a journalist by profession. His preoccupation with the real issues of the day became apparent in his theatrical works. His *Estonian Funeral*, staged by Priit Pedajas at the Estonian Drama Theater (2002), examined the myth about the Estonian love of labor and native land with great irony. At the funeral of a 100-year-old Estonian farmer named Andres, his children, neighbors and relatives presented the traditional way of life folk-style. It is filled with endless work and duties. During the outdoor funerary meal, a big stack of wood had to be chopped, even though there is no need for firewood. The director is very critical of national masochistic attempts to remember the deportations and emigrations all the time. He even used elements of clowning and the grotesque to release his heroes from the phantoms of the past. Some nostalgia also appeared in the very depths of the story. The question was posed as to what will become of Estonia once all the human and natural resources have been used up. Will young Estonians leave their native land for warmer countries?

In Marius Ivaškevičius' *Madagaskaras*, staged by Rimas Tuminas at the Small Theater of Vilnius (2004), both the playwright and the director spoke wittily and with gentle irony about the idea of buying Madagascar as the new Lithuanian homeland. As preparations are under way for a new Russian occupation the healthiest Lithuanians would be brought there to create an ideal Lithuania. The idea and the characters of the play are based in reality. The protagonist Kazimieras Pokštas has a real prototype in Kazys Pokštas. He was a geographer and traveler who was famous for his utopian ideas in the 1930s. *Madagaskaras* discussed the myth of Lithuanian ancient dignity and power, rewriting the story of Atlantis. It was Lithuanians who sank into the ocean with their

civilization. They continued their agricultural activities even at the bottom of the sea. They eventually rose to the surface and created Greek culture.

This new Lithuanian 'cosmogony' was a grotesque parody and irony, yet simultaneously also a hymn to Lithuania. The intonation of the performance was not mocking, but full of compassion for the nation's past and present problems and disasters. The hero eagerly called upon his contemporaries to face the sea. The ability of the authors to laugh at national stereotypes and ambitions displayed a positive trend. They identified modern Lithuania as a representative nation that is able to look beyond its narrow horizons and former conventions. The surprising synthesis of irony with playful, metaphorical poetics in the style of the performance confirmed a high level of Lithuanian theatrical culture.

In Latvia the relationship between the theater and contemporary national drama is very complicated. Some directors have serious doubts about the artistic potential of traditional dramatic theater. A new model of the 'post-dramatic' theater emerged. The German critic Hans-Thies Lehmann and the Scandinavian critic Jens Christian Lauenstein Led (Lauenstein Led 2004, pp. 93–106) argue that this specific type of theater has abandoned drama as its basis. Instead, it uses a broad variety of aesthetic theatrical strategies and techniques. 'Post-dramatic' in this case is not to be confused with 'post-modern.' post-dramatic theater has moved beyond drama, but not necessarily beyond the borders of modernism. Representatives of this type of theater, such as the director Alvis Hermanis, realized that a traditional theater based on drama has lost its significance in a society where mass media play a dominant role. Why? Theater is not virtual, but real. This theater takes advantage of the fact that its basic means of expression are real: it uses the body and the private lives of the performers in a more crucial way than in dramatic theater. It deploys media, such as film, live online cameras, and video, etc., to emphasize that theater is not media.

This refusal to take up traditional plays was realized in two productions by Alvis Hermanis in the New Riga Theater: *The Long Life* (2003) and *Latvian Stories* (2004). His work announced that today, the life of any ordinary person contains more drama than all of Shakespeare's plays. He sent his actors to meet their contemporaries, to study their problems and biographies, and then to create stories derived from this documentary material. A story-telling technique is used in these performances. The actors prepared their stage stories by themselves and are the 'full-time authors' of the performances. In *The Long Life* five young actors played out one day in Latvian pensioners' lives without using any words. The actors literally invested their own bodies and personalities to create convincing scenes and stories about senior citizens and their struggles with poverty, loneliness and fear. In *Latvian Stories* a series of 20 mono-performances were created to reflect a kaleidoscopic image of Latvia today. After adapting different foreign aesthetic systems, the New Riga Theater returned to psychological and documentary theater. It looked at Latvia's everyday reality, and did not feel ashamed of it. In an era of growing globalization, this project affirmed that a simple Latvian fisherman, bus driver, kindergarten teacher or striptease dancer are attractive enough to become artistic subjects. Self-identification here is not achieved through ancient or modern myths, or through the rewriting of national history. It is closely linked to current and urgent social problems.

Examples of post-dramatic theater can also be found in Estonia. Director Tiit Ojaso's production of *State of Things* was based on materials published in the popular internet portal *Delfi*. It referenced hot social topics, and evidenced the desire of theater to prove itself as a lively part of today's social and intellectual culture.

In conclusion, the process of defining a new theatrical identity in all three Baltic countries during the decade 1995–2005 exhibited both common tendencies and different problems for each country. First, theater lost its previous ideological importance, but developed many new aesthetic experiences. Second, the trend of self-identification through the world's classics remained strong in all of the Baltic theaters, although using different theatrical styles and aesthetic approaches. Third, Estonian contemporary national drama exhibited a firm foundation for developing current theater. In Lithuania and Latvia more skepticism and more problems in this area were apparent.

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