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End-of-the-Millennium Latvian Theatre: The Concept of the National Historical Past

ANDRA RUTKĒVIČA

In Latvia, like in the whole former Soviet Union, the wave of ethnic nationalism is being identified with the end of the 1980s and it also embraces the politicisation of culture. In reality it means returning to the historical past, to an idealised image — “what we have been before” — that could serve as a model for the nation in future. With this mission in mind, Dailes Theatre (Arts Theatre) staged Aleksandr Čaks’s (1901–1950) heroic saga *Mūzibas skārtie* (*Touched by Eternity*, 1937–39) in 1987. It speaks about the heroic battles of Latvian riflemen during the World War I that helped to regain Latvia from the Germans and made it possible to establish Latvia as an independent state.

The piece written by A. Čaks at the end of the 1930s has had a complicated history. It was not been published during the whole Soviet period. The earlier editions of *Touched by Eternity* (of 1938, 1940) were kept in the closed funds of libraries and were not accessible to readers up till the end of the 1980s. In the 1960s some literature scholars, attributing expressive critical epithets to *Touched by Eternity*, at least managed to mention the title of this piece publicly. The 1970s and 1980s were even harsher years — it was forbidden to mention the title of the work in any context — neither analysing, nor criticising, nor praising. As if this poetic piece did not exist at all in Latvian literature ... What were the reasons why *Touched by Eternity* was so threatening to the Soviet regime? Why was it so desperately hidden from the people?

The epic consists of 24 songs. It begins with an unexpected encounter of the Poet — a person exhausted and depressed by life — with the visions of the past — the Latvian riflemen. This is

followed by singing the praise of the war experience of the riflemen. Čaks introduces each episode with a straightforward, purely historic comment, which is followed by poetic and emotional verses about the battles of riflemen. The emotional praise of the nation's heroic spirit becomes more significant than the historical event itself.

The staging of the epic in Dailes Theatre was based on the same emotional tonality. The performance started with the news that the poet Aleksandr Čaks had passed away. And everything that followed was a specific process of recalling — first of all calling back memories about Čaks's life, secondly — about the legends of the riflemen.

There was an intention to introduce into the production auto-biographical motives from Čaks's own life. In the performance the poet's Alter Ego was turned into an independent stage character — The Shadow following the Poet (played by P. Liepiņš, J. Frīnbergs). Still, this externally projected Poet's internal battle with himself does not provide the dramatic accent of the production. The protagonist can sooner be characterised as condemned or doomed. His hopes, his longings belong to the past.

The riflemen of Dailes Theatre belong to the world of memories, as a ready-made symbol of the heroic past. Created by memories, one by one the riflemen rise from the netherworld, cross the stage and slowly walk up the stairs at the back of the stage — from their grave (oblivion), through the present towards eternity (heaven, the nation's memory).

The image of Death appears on the stage next to the Poet and the riflemen both — as a real character which follows them, and as an embodiment of the concrete consequences brought by war. The first battle in Čaks' poem is followed by the first death — the first killed rifleman. Čaks very laconically and precisely reminds us that the death of one person is a tragedy, but the death of many people — just statistics. The episode with the first killed rifleman became one of the most emotional moments of this production. The killed rifleman, played by a young actor Rihards Zihmanis, meets on the stage his bride, played by one of the first actresses of Dailes Theatre Irma Laiva. This tragically brief love-affair — a bride who waited for and never saw again her ever-young killed rifleman, and the obvious time distance between both actors very

vividly and dramatically revealed the irreversibility of war disasters and tragedies that was even more accented by the love lyrics recited by the actors.

The theme of riflemen, instead of direct action, is conveyed in the form of narration, memories. The former participants of battles, dressed in everyday clothes representing different professions, remember their battles but the ones dressed in riflemen uniform coats do not participate in their conversations. They become a symbol of the muteness of the riflemen passed away. The only exception is the first killed rifleman.

Only once — in Piņķu church — they join in common prayer. This is one of the central and most emotional episodes in this epic saga. In Piņķu church Colonel Vācietis spoke from the pulpit to inspire his soldiers before battle. In the theatre production the inspiring speech is delivered not by a rifleman, but by the Poet. It can even be said that in the theatre production the riflemen with the words of their common prayer inspire the Poet to deliver a speech about the role of belief, about developing one's spirit through love for one's motherland. It embodies the apotheosis of people's longings and hopes.

In the narrative intonation of the production the Poet's direct speech acquires double significance because it simultaneously addresses two audiences: the one acting in the play — the riflemen, as well as the audience sitting in the theatre. In K. Auškāps's production the riflemen and the people are identical. And in the episode in Piņķu church the sermon makes the concept of people broader, including not only all the actors, but also the audience.

It can be said that riflemen are the best part of the nation — its conscience and decency. At least the production tends to make them like that. And still the theme of Latvian riflemen is not only the theme of heroism and love for one's motherland. It is as contradictory as the fate of the poet himself. Riflemen have fought also under foreign flags, defending the ideas of the socialist revolution. The development of these events brings in a new tonality in Čaks' poetic work — instead of the heroic spirit and courage there is looming a mind dazed by the war. The Dailes Theatre production tends to overlook this. For this production it is more important to seek for and to show the pages of the heroic past.

The staging of *Touched by Eternity* in Dailes Theatre became an EVENT in the life of the Soviet Latvia. It was the first public attempt to speak about the heroic history of the Latvian nation. For the first time during the 50-year period they spoke about and brought onto the stage the national maroon-white-maroon flag. *Touched by Eternity* became a reminder that the history of the Latvian nation did not start with 1940 — the establishment of the Soviet state. With the help of this production the theatre managed to wake up and strengthen the historic memory of the people, to unify them with the help of common symbols from the past. In the context of this production the past becomes a stimulus, a self-confidence-developing source that opens the prospect of eternity for the nation.

As a continuation of disclosing the legend of the riflemen, in 1989 in Liepājas Theatre there was staged a new version of Čaks's poem — *Psihiskais uzbrukums (Psychic attack)* with a totally different emphasis and focus. Čaks's *Touched by Eternity* forms the basis of Juris Rijnieks's and Uldis Ašmanis's stage version, there are extracts used also from other works of the poet, as well as documentary materials: extracts from World War I and the Civil War media (orders, calls, announcements, speeches, correspondence etc.) The historic materials studied at the end of the 1980s reveal the fate of the riflemen as being much more complicated, controversial and also more attractive than it used to be up to till then.

The performance starts when the Poet, acted by Juris Bartkevičs, is coming through the audience hall, dressed in a grey suit, holding a lantern with a burning candle in his hand. His eyes wander around, and the look in his eyes is disappointed, empty, overwhelmed by hopelessness. There is much more despair and Čaks's own life in this Poet than in the Dailes Theatre performance. "The grey suit of the intellectual will lie on the back of the chair, a knife blade finds the pulsing blood-vessels at the tucked-up sleeve and... falls down on the floor in desperate anger. No strength to live and no strength to die." (Čakare 1989: 9)

Suddenly the Gloomy Man with two companions appears in front of the Poet and offers the Poet a Faustian agreement: for the price of his life to turn back the wheel of history and to let the Poet together with riflemen experience their life. From this moment on

the course of life common for the riflemen, the Poet and the people has commenced.

The whole play is devoted to the fight between the Poet and the Gloomy Man (this character has been borrowed from Čaks' another poem *Matīss — kausu bajārs*) for the riflemen's souls. For the first time there is a clash between two totally opposite opinions about riflemen: the heightened heroism expressed by the Poet and the totally cynical denial, represented by the Gloomy Man. On the one hand there is the calmness, imperturbability and indifference of the evil about everything that happens, on the other, the emotional personality of the Poet who manages to recapture from the cynicism of history quite a big share of the riflemen's fame, courage, selflessness and sacrifice. But, when after the first battle the Poet has finished praising the courage of the riflemen, the evil figures run down tumbling from the top of the stage platform and throw an open coffin at his feet, reminding him that there is no abstract death. Death is always very concrete — with a coffin. An icy silence falls. The first killed Latvian rifleman dressed in a white shirt and holding a red carnation in his hand comes from above with silent steps. The fisherman of souls fastens to his fishing rod a worsted untied from the hand of the killed man. And it is only the beginning, there will be more — a whole bunch of maroon-white-maroon worsteds and a whole armful of carnations will fill up the coffin.

A new higher-level tragic truth is born in the collision between the theses and anti-theses expressed by artistically equal forces. In this production each next step of epiphany, each next stage in the transfer from noble enthusiasm to the awareness of reality has been precisely calculated and explicitly outlined. Riflemen are going to fight, but in the role of their leaders more and more often there appears somebody from the trio of Satan. The philosophical concept of the satanic trio can be clearly seen: evil is multiform. The scope of the devil's actions is very broad — from transmuting sacred ideas, selfless intentions into farce to mental crippling of a human being.

The first act of the play is called *Touched by Eternity*. Action takes place on a white stage. In many aspects this is a tragic and still noble battle. The scene of the second act *Psychic attack* is in brownish red — in the colour of blood. This time the riflemen go

to fight in a foreign territory, becoming the victims of revolution and psychic attack. The actors of Liepājas Theatre look at history from today's viewpoint, taking into account the historical background — what has happened since the battles of riflemen.

The second act of the play marks the end of the internal psychological change of the riflemen. Warfare becomes a profession. Also the red colour, the colour of blood, more and more appears in the uniforms of the leaders of riflemen. E. Vilsons's Colonel Briedis has a red wrap, but Vācietis has gloves in the colour of blood. In this context the famous sermon of Colonel Vācietis in Piņķu church acquires a different meaning. The colonel, played by Jānis Makovskis, uses the same words used by the Poet in the Dailes Theatre production, but this time the message is totally different. The belief in motherland is not emphasised any more, the main idea is that it will not revive without blood. "There is a unexpected shift of meaning taking place. Blood is no more an argument for the freedom of motherland, but the freedom of motherland becomes an argument for bloodshed." (Ib.) The change of uniforms is used as an indicator for the riflemen losing their spirituality — instead of camouflage colour tunics they put on black mercenary uniforms.

In Čaks's poem the title *Psychic attack* is given to the chapter where in the battlefield riflemen meet with the invincible white guards regiment — the crack troops of Russia's army with orthodox priests as their leaders. In Liepājas Theatre production from the conceptual aspect this is one of the most essential episodes. Riflemen are going to the battle with their eyes covered with a red bandage — obsessed by ideas and blood. This is the moment when we can see most explicitly that ethics is not a class but human category. But it turns out that the white guards crack troops have not been the ones they have pretended to be. At the moment when the priests die from the hands of the riflemen, their masks fall off and the three Satans revive (evil that cannot be exterminated by physical force). It is the most devilish provocation of the time — to force riflemen to be opponents of spirituality. Riflemen turn their faces towards the people but they turn away in horror. And riflemen remain standing solemn and undefeatable — on the verge of the grave. Destroyed by their own victory. "Psychic attack" is also a story about what war does to people.

At the end of the play the Poet passes away. But this is a totally different departure from this world than the first (unsuccessful) attempt. At the back of the stage behind the Poet the deceased rifleman and live people are gathering around the newborn symbol of Mother Latvia. Motherland and its founders — its people are inseparable and mutually interacting phenomena. The production of Liepājas Theatre stressed a bitter and unpleasant truth, which the theatre scholar Valda Čakare has very precisely defined as the riflemen's way from national pride to national tragedy.

This generalisation can be attributed, on a broader scale, to the road of the epic saga *Touched by Eternity* to the audience. From Dailes Theatre production's riflemen as a testimony of national pride to the tragedy of historic realism and unpleasant truth in Liepājas Theatre's performance. From the necessity to identify unifying, fame-interwoven historic facts, which could serve as a new national religion (because history can best of all serve for consolidating people, especially in the territory of Latvia, where there are Lutheran, Catholic and Orthodox believers) towards an analytic and emotional evaluation of the past where many traits of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* theories can be traced. If we recall the above-mentioned functions of historic experience, the aim of which is to reveal the society its true nature and the hidden mission of fate, then the production of Liepājas Theatre already demanded a strong nation, which could identify itself not only with heroic episodes from the past, but also acquire experience and learn from it.

It is very essential to note that the productions of both theatres very precisely and directly addressed their time, in some cases even running ahead of it. If Dailes Theatre production encouraged the audience by emphasising: "Go deeper into your nation/ Learn to feel its pain..." (Čaks 1988: 35), which was a demonstration of true courage in the pre-awakening period, then two years later Liepājas theatre asked a more provoking question: "Nation, people do you see them/ will you ever understand them." (Čaks 1988: 170) The reality proved that the audiences did not always understand, or putting it more precisely, they did not want to accept this unpleasant viewpoint that differed from the general pathetic mood.

And still, irrespective of how different the intonations of both productions were — in both cases the message, the artistic

objective was quite similar, and I would like to define it as a necessity to create a model of national identity using history and a national heroic poem as a foundation for it.

English sociologist Anthony D. Smith writes that “By identifying oneself with a “nation” in the secular world, we can most safely overcome the absoluteness of death and to a certain extent guarantee immortality for ourselves. And that is not all — a nation can offer a person famous future, which reminds of its heroic past. Therefore nation encourages a person to act in accordance with the common mission of fate, which will be fulfilled by the generations to come.” (Smith 1997: 164) Thus the issue of national history acquires double significance, because it helps not only to understand the past, but also to structure the future. And from this approach it follows that our history and the way in which we interpret it, determines our identity.

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