

# The school theatre as a place of cultural learning: the case of Soviet Latvia (1960s–1980s)

Iveta Kestere

To cite this article: Iveta Kestere (2017) The school theatre as a place of cultural learning: the case of Soviet Latvia (1960s–1980s), *Paedagogica Historica*, 53:3, 318-341, DOI: [10.1080/00309230.2017.1307857](https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2017.1307857)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2017.1307857>



Published online: 07 Apr 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 175



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## The school theatre as a place of cultural learning: the case of Soviet Latvia (1960s–1980s)

Iveta Kestere

Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Art, University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia

### ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to reveal how through school theatre activities under authoritarian rule, changes took place in pupil knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviour regarding culture, namely, how the process of cultural learning occurs. I use a historical case study, specifically the case of the Valmiera School Theatre, which was the leading theatre group, not only in Soviet Latvia, but also in the entire Soviet Union. My primary sources are eight unstructured interviews, 20 published memoirs, articles in the press, theatre programmes, and photographs. One part of Soviet pedagogy was aesthetic upbringing, which was implemented through state-funded collectives, including school theatre groups. By participating in theatre activities, students gained knowledge of cultural heritage (literature, theatre, art, etc.), the ability to perform and acquire skills in other practical fields, and developed an appreciation of culture as a value. I argue that cultural learning through theatre was demonstrated by the fact that the students transferred their knowledge, skills, and attitudes to a new context, namely, their places of work and public cultural activities (e.g. amateur theatres). This case study also reveals the specific role of school theatre in the process of cultural learning, as well as some sensitive issues in the relationship between knowledge-orientated or formal educational environments, and the informal creativity of school theatre.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 December 2015


Accepted 14 March 2017

### KEYWORDS

School theatre; cultural learning; Latvia

## Introduction

Cultural heritage can be revealed, displayed, and acquired in a variety of places and spaces: museums, art galleries, archives, parks, etc. Theatre is also included as a place in which historical memory can be preserved and displayed.<sup>1</sup> Theatrical rituals are one of the most ancient forms of creativity;<sup>2</sup> they present societal norms, values, and behaviours that have their roots in history to contemporary audiences. Just as school and church are inextricably connected to cultural heritage, so too is theatre. But in order to make it understandable

**CONTACT** Iveta Kestere  [iveta.kestere@lu.lv](mailto:iveta.kestere@lu.lv)

<sup>1</sup>Kevin Myers and Ian Grosvenor, "Cultural Learning and Historical Memory: A Research Agenda," *Encounters/Encuentros/Rencontres on Education* 15 (2014): 4.

<sup>2</sup>Kirsten Hastrup, "Theatre as a Site of Passage," in *Ritual, Performance, Media*, ed. Felicia Hughes-Freeland (London: Routledge, 1998), 31.

and emotionally significant to today's audiences, the performers themselves must acquire cultural heritage. Members of theatre companies are included in the creative process, which incorporates understanding and reflecting on culture by interpreting it in various ways (acting, directing, scenography) and presenting it to the viewer. This process cannot avoid changes in the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviour of those involved in theatre. Thus, according to Wellington, this process becomes learning.<sup>3</sup> The most visible outcome of the learning process is the transfer of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to a new context; for example, from school to the work place.

Myers and Grosvenor cite many researchers who note that positive outcomes in learning about cultural heritage have usually been claimed, rather than demonstrated.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the goal of this paper is to reveal, by using a historical case study, how cultural learning took place through school theatre activities under an authoritarian regime. My study is an initial exploration of material; I am not making hard claims, but rather drawing connections between performing in school theatres and cultural learning.

Valmiera School Theatre was chosen as a case study – this group was not just the leading school theatre in Soviet Latvia, but also in the entire Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> The Valmiera School Theatre won several theatre competitions in Latvia and was the first in the Soviet Union to receive the honorary title “Community Theatre”. Prior to that, only adult amateur theatres with a stable company of actors had earned this title.<sup>6</sup> Valmiera School Theatre survived the collapse of the USSR, and by following some old traditions and creating new ones, continues to stand firm in the Latvian cultural landscape.

Researching Valmiera School Theatre was a challenge to me as a scholar because the theatre director was my father-in-law. For over 18 years, until his death in 1999, we had close familial ties, but I was less interested in his professional activities. I did attend a few Valmiera School Theatre performances and read play reviews, and I was aware that this theatre and its director were famous. Yet, to me, he was always and only my father-in-law – a wonderful husband, father, and grandfather, who was quite emotional, direct, charming, and the centre of attention. So he remains in my memory. But this research required that I view him from a different perspective: I reconstructed his professional career as a researcher. However, behind all research, even research described as objective or positivist, there is a human being with his/her own thoughts, feelings, culture, environment, and social and personal history.<sup>7</sup> As a result, I do not worry about the subjectivity of my interpretation, but rather about my ability to weave together my reflections with those of the respondents in order to allow the reader to draw his/her own conclusions.

In order to reveal the process of cultural learning from the “inside”, I used unstructured interviews, following methodology described by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison.<sup>8</sup> I

<sup>3</sup>Jerry Wellington, *Secondary Education: The Key Concepts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 132.

<sup>4</sup>Myers and Grosvenor, “Cultural Learning and Historical Memory: A Research Agenda,” 5.

<sup>5</sup>Valmiera (*Wolmar* in German) is located 110 km from the capital city Riga and 50 km from the Estonian border. Valmiera is first mentioned in mediaeval chronicles in 1213, and throughout the centuries it was one of the cultural and educational centres of Latvia. A Latvian theatre group already operated here at the end of the nineteenth century. During the Soviet era, the population of Valmiera was around 20,000–30,000 people.

<sup>6</sup>“Panorāma” [Panorama], *Dzimtenes Balss* [Voice of the homeland], February 16, 1978; Velga Ernstreite, “Sprīdītis’ iziet pasaulē” [“Sprīdītis” goes out into the world], *Zvaigzne* [Star], January 5, 1978.

<sup>7</sup>Kim Etherington, “Reflexivity: Using Our ‘Selves’ in Narrative Research,” in *Narrative Research on Learning: Comparative and International Perspectives*, ed. Sheila Trahar (Didcot: Symposium Books, 2009), 77, 82.

<sup>8</sup>Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 355, 361–72.

interviewed eight people who were involved in the school theatre from 1967 to 1981: two student actors, two technical student workers, two students from the audience, one student who failed to be accepted in the theatre class, and one teacher. Each recorded interview lasted about an hour. Questions were prepared, but during the course of the interviews, they were modified and supplemented in order to attain the research goal more effectively.

I also used the memoirs of 20 former students from Valmiera, incorporated in the only book on the history of school theatre published in Latvia – “*Spridītis*” in *The Happy Land*<sup>9</sup> – and dedicated to the Valmiera School Theatre as sources for my research. The book is not an academic study, but rather a documentation of the theatre’s activity through a compilation of press articles and theatre members’ memories, without the rigours of academic research methodology or fact analysis.

The 28 memory stories were supplemented with photographs, a cinema magazine *Pionieris* [Pioneer], playbills, and posters from the memorial room of the Valmiera School Theatre, the collection of the Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents, and private collections. In order to understand the context of the era, I also used pedagogical press clippings and textbooks on pedagogy.

The first section of the paper gives the historical context in which the school theatre operated, namely, the era of Soviet dictatorship in Latvia, when the performing arts were thoroughly incorporated into the aesthetic direction of communist upbringing of the “New Man” and strongly supported and regulated by the state. The second section describes the development of the Valmiera School Theatre under the bright personality of the teacher director, who guided an ordinary school theatre group to a level of professionalism that resulted in fame throughout Latvia. The third section is devoted to the Valmiera School Theatre repertoire, where art, creativity, and emotions helped mitigate the dues paid to political ideology. The findings highlight and explain how cultural learning occurred through the previously described activities of the school theatre, how the students transferred their knowledge, skills, and attitudes to a new context, namely, their places of work and public cultural activities (e.g. amateur theatres), and how belonging to the theatre, school, and local community preserved Latvian identity under communist rule.

## Aesthetic upbringing in the Soviet Union and the origins of the school theatre movement

From the end of World War II until 1991, all creative activities in Latvia took place under specific political conditions – Soviet dictatorship. Soviet rule, of course, affected the work of school theatres. Therefore, it is important to explain the historic context in which Soviet students engaged in the cultural learning process.

The socialist educational concept prioritised the end goal: an ideal education that facilitated the development of a highly educated and well-rounded creator of communist society – the “New Man”. Thus, communist education was divided into five strict parts (or “directions” in Russian) – aesthetic, intellectual, moral, physical, and work education.<sup>10</sup> These five parts were implemented in every educational institution, making them the general education agenda of the entire Soviet Union. The purpose of aesthetic education was to cultivate taste,

---

<sup>9</sup>Māris Lapsiņš, ed., “*Spridītis*” *Iaimīgajā zemē* [“*Spridītis*” in the happy land] (Valmiera: SIA “Valmieras tipogrāfija LAPA”, 2015).

<sup>10</sup>Tatjana Iljina, *Pedagogija* [Pedagogy] (Rīga: Zvaigzne, 1971), 43–180.

or the “perception of beauty”. This was done by encouraging student participation (based upon their abilities) and fulfilling themselves in the field of the arts.<sup>11</sup> Aesthetic education included various creative activities for students, in and outside the school. The state financed student choirs, dance ensembles, drawing groups, and, of course, school theatres.<sup>12</sup>

After World War II, a turn towards cultural education was also topical on the other side of the Iron Curtain,<sup>13</sup> but the peculiarity of the Soviet system was the comprehensive command and controlling role of the Communist Party, which pervaded every creative activity of all Soviet citizens. Communist Party dictates regulated Soviet formal and informal education entirely and were put into practice quickly and without discussion. In 1963, the General Meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party stated that the aesthetic upbringing of children in the Soviet Union should be improved,<sup>14</sup> and a range of associated administrative documentation was issued in all Soviet republics.<sup>15</sup> For example in 1963, ministries of culture in the various Soviet republics instructed professional theatres to stage plays for children, and radio and television were charged with creating broadcasts that promoted aesthetic upbringing.<sup>16</sup> The results were that almost two generations of Soviet people grew up with high-quality plays for children in which the best professional actors took part and which were directed by the best directors of professional theatres.

In Latvian schools, aesthetic upbringing activities, decreed by the Soviet ruling order, were greeted with great enthusiasm. In this case, Communist Party recommendations completely coincided with Latvian traditions as the following examples illustrate. Latvian peasants, who lived in Dikļi manor,<sup>17</sup> first staged a play around 1818 in a hay barn – Friedrich Schiller’s drama *The Robbers*, translated by a manor coachman into Latvian.<sup>18</sup> Latvians continued to stage plays – even during the most inhospitable conditions – on the frontlines during World War II<sup>19</sup> and while residing in refugee camps, where children of various ages also participated.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 147.

<sup>12</sup>Rasa Jautakyte, Ene Mägi, Žemena Vazne and Dzintra Grundmane, “Extracurricular Activities,” in *History of Pedagogy and Educational Sciences in the Baltic Countries from 1940 to 1990: An Overview*, ed. Iveta Ķestere and Aida Krūze (Riga: Raka, 2013), 98–111.

<sup>13</sup>Ken Jones, *Education in Britain 1944 to the Present* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 57–66.

<sup>14</sup>Par partijas ideoloģiskā darba kārtējiem uzdevumiem. PSKP CK Plēnuma 1963. gada 21. jūnijā lēmums sakarā ar PSKP CK sekretāra b. L. Iljičova referātu [About the party’s current tasks for ideological work. Soviet Union Communist Party Central Committee Decision of 21 June 1963 Regarding the Report by CPSU CC Secretary Comrade L. Iljicov], *Cīņa* [Struggle], June 22, 1963.

<sup>15</sup>Postanovljenje bjuro CK KPSS po RSFSR ot 22 avgusta 1963 goda ‘O sostojaniji i merah po ulucseniju esteticeskovo vospitanija ucascijsja obsceobrazovatelnih skol RSFSR’ [Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic Communist Party Central Committee Decision, 22 August 1963 ‘On the situation of aesthetic upbringing in RSFSR general education schools and possibilities for improvement’], *Ucitelskaja gazeta* [Teacher newspaper], September 10, 1963; V. Jansons, LKP CK Ideoloģiskās nodaļas zinātnes un mācību iestāžu sektora vadītājs [LCO CC Head of the Ideological department for education and science institutions], “Augstu komunistisko idejiskumu” [High communist ideals], *Cīņa*, May 17, 1963.

<sup>16</sup>F. G. Panacin, M. N. Kolmakova and Z. I. Ravkin, eds., *Ocerki istorii skoli i pedagogiceskoj mislji narodov SSSR, 1961 – 1986gg* [Essays on the history of school and pedagogical thought of the nations of the USSR] (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1987), 298.

<sup>17</sup>Dikļi – a hamlet that developed around Dikļi manor, located 20 km from Valmiera and 122 km from Riga.

<sup>18</sup>Austra Avotiņa, et al. *Latvijas kultūras vēsture* [History of Latvian culture] (Riga: Zvaigzne ABC, 2003), 163.

<sup>19</sup>Gunta Strautmane, ed., *Dialogā ar vēsturi. Pētera Krupņikova dzīvesstāsts* [Dialogue with history. Life story of Pēteris Krupņikovs] (Riga: Zinātne, 2015), 109.

<sup>20</sup>Andris Kadeģis, *Izrakteņi. Atmiņas un liecības. XX gadsimts* [Fossils. Memories and evidence. XX century] (Riga: Dienas Grāmata, 2011), 89–90.



**Figure 1.** Valmiera Elementary School no. 1 theatre group, 1928–29. Photo from the collection of Valmiera Museum, File no. 35.662.

School theatre, having century-long traditions in Europe and popular among the German minority in Latvia,<sup>21</sup> was first promoted in Latvian newspapers in 1916,<sup>22</sup> and theatres in Latvian schools continued to operate during the 1920s and 1930s. However, school theatre was not a homogeneous movement in Latvia before the “Soviet times” and was primarily based on the initiative and enthusiasm of individual teachers who would occasionally create a theatre group that put on Christmas plays and simple works by professional playwrights, who wrote especially for school theatres (see Figure 1).<sup>23</sup>

School theatre only became a state-organised, state-run, and state-controlled movement during the Soviet era. Legitimised and activated by the Soviet regime, the century-old Latvian passion for theatre was lifted to the level of state importance. Despite the dictatorship and strict censorship during the years of Soviet rule, theatre became a special “spiritual

<sup>21</sup>The origins of school theatre are considered to be found in the Middle Ages, since the twelfth century, when dramas in Greek and Latin were put on by students in town squares. It is quite possible that the Riga Cathedral School, founded in 1211, also performed such plays. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Protestant school dramas in German language became popular in Germany. German culture dominated on Latvian territory, resulting in performances by Riga Cathedral School students, such as the 1527 performance of Burkard Waldis's play *Der Verlorene Sohn*. Discussions on the role of theatre in education continued in Europe during the course of the next centuries – the classics were too difficult for pupils and more modern plays were considered frivolous. Play performances were replaced with readings of the scripts. School theatre gained an important role during the late nineteenth century with the growth of the Progressive Education movement and entered Latvian schools at the beginning of the twentieth century. (Ojārs Zanders, *Gadsimtu siluēti Rīgas bruņakmeņos* [Century outlines on the cobblestones of Riga] (Riga: Jumava, 2002), 60; Tanja Klepacki, *Bildungsprozesse im Schultheater. Eine ethnographische Studie* (Münster: Waxmann, 2016), 12–21).

<sup>22</sup>“Skolas teātris” [School theatre], *Dzimtenes Vēstnesis* [Homeland Herald], September 24, 1916.

<sup>23</sup>P. Gailītis, “Skolu teātri un sarīkojumi” [School theatres and social events], *Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts* [Ministry of Education Monthly] 4 (1936): 359–66.





**Figure 2.** Scene from a Grade 6 performance at Riga Secondary School no. 49, 1971. Photo from the personal archive of Iveta Kestere.

place” – an island away from the primitive political propaganda which dominated in the public sphere. Like all other rituals, theatre “creates social solidarity, forges ethnic identity, and engenders *communitas*”;<sup>24</sup> and all of these elements were important for Latvians as a means of preserving and even strengthening their identity during the years of Soviet rule. As Rose stated:

The migration of Russian-speakers into the Baltic region, especially in Estonia and Latvia, reduced Estonian- and Latvian-speakers to a bare majority, but did not lead to their Russification. [...] Nonetheless, the Baltic peoples retained a strong sense of their national identity.<sup>25</sup>

Theatres were reintroduced in Soviet Latvian schools immediately after World War II, despite poorly heated spaces and a lack of costumes,<sup>26</sup> but the nationwide school theatre movement accelerated in the 1950s when students performed plays in almost every school (see Figure 2).

Throughout the Soviet Union, including Latvia, school theatres were definitely not like the drama classes that existed in the UK until the 1980s, which Abbs describes as “psychotherapy groups”: “When the work was finished, it was judged most often in terms of

<sup>24</sup>Madeline Duntley, “Observing Meaning: Ritual Criticism, Interpretation, and Anthropological Fieldwork,” in *Celebrations of Identity: Multiple Voices in American Ritual Performance*, ed. Pamela R. Frese (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1993), 1.

<sup>25</sup>Richard Rose, *Understanding Post-Communist Transformation: A Bottom Up Approach* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 13.

<sup>26</sup>Valdis Rūja, “Jaunatnes sarīkojums” [Youth event], *Padomju Jaunatne* [Soviet Youth], November, 12, 1946; J. Sars, “Skolēnu sarīkojumā [At a pupil event],” *Padomju Jaunatne*, April 18, 1946.

its personal sincerity and was greeted by a half moral and half therapeutic: ‘Thank you for sharing it with us.’<sup>27</sup> In Latvia, amateur theatres were always product-oriented (performance for the audience), referring to Taylor’s notion of the difference between drama and theatre: ‘a most peculiar distinction of drama from theatre was made, where those who did drama claimed they were involved in process-oriented modes, whereas those who did theatre were interested in the product’.<sup>28</sup> So, school theatre in Latvia was a miniature version of professional theatre where everything was ‘for real’ – there was a director (usually a teacher but sometimes also a student), actors, stage decorations, and costumes. Performances needed to be impeccable and ‘rehearsals were not that simple. It was a job.’<sup>29</sup>

Student plays were evaluated seriously. At first, school theatre competitions, which had taken place since 1971, occurred at the district level and the best theatre groups went to the capital, Riga, to compete.<sup>30</sup> The judges gave assessment points, and the best theatre directors (teachers) were awarded diplomas issued by the Ministry of Education.<sup>31</sup> The Valmiera School Theatre won these theatre competitions on regular basis.

## The evolution of the school theatre

### *The director and modest beginnings*

The creation and success of the Valmiera School Theatre began with a history teacher who arrived in 1958 from Riga and who became the director of the theatre group, which was originally founded as an extracurricular activity in the secondary school<sup>32</sup> of Valmiera.<sup>33</sup> He was 23 years old and had experience as a local celebrity in school and university theatres. He had dreamed of becoming a professional actor, but his mother forced him to study history and become a teacher.<sup>34</sup> The director could not only act, but he also was a great artist and skilled in other theatre arts (such as making wigs and putting on make-up), very knowledgeable in music and the history of art, and he knew the Stanislavsky acting method.<sup>35</sup> He had everything it took to become the director of the school theatre – knowledge, experience, enthusiasm, creative spirit, and a wife, also a teacher, who stood by her husband in all his endeavours.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Peter Abbs, *Against the Flow: Education, the Arts and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003), 50.

<sup>28</sup>Philip Taylor, *The Drama Classroom: Action, Reflection, Transformation* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2000), 5.

<sup>29</sup>Interview no. 5, May 20, 2015.

<sup>30</sup>R. Pilādze, ‘Septiņi skolas teātri’ [Seven school theatres], *Padomju Jaunatne*, January 5, 1971.

<sup>31</sup>Ausma Stūrite, ‘Skolēnu pašdarbības skates fināls’ [School amateur theatre competition finals], *Cīņa* [Fight], January 13, 1971, quoted in Lapsiņš, ed., ‘*Sprīditis*’ *laimīgajā zemē* [‘*Sprīditis*’ in the happy land], 46.

<sup>32</sup>The name ‘secondary school’ in Soviet Latvia denoted schools that combined the first eight grades of basic education and an additional three grades of secondary education.

<sup>33</sup>Respecting the family’s wishes for privacy, I did not name this director in my paper. In short, he was born in independent Latvia in Riga in 1935 to an officer in the Latvian army and a homemaker. The director’s father was deported to Siberia by Soviet authorities in 1940, from where he returned to Latvia at the end of the 1950s, but no longer lived with his family. The director was raised by his mother and her sisters in very dire circumstances. He graduated from the Faculty of History at Latvia State University. During his university years, he was a leading figure in the university theatre, where he met his wife. Two sons were raised in their family and one of them became a professional actor. He spent his entire working career teaching history in Valmiera and died in 1999 at the age of 64.

<sup>34</sup>Margarita Slūka, ‘Manas atmiņas par skolas teātra gadiem – vislabākās’ [My memories of the years spent in the school theatre – the best] in Lapsiņš, ed., ‘*Sprīditis*’ *laimīgajā zemē*, 18.

<sup>35</sup>Konstatin Stanislavsky (1863–1938) was a renowned Soviet Russian actor and director. The main idea of his method was that the actor must embrace and connect with the character and display genuine emotions when portraying the role.

<sup>36</sup>As we know from many examples related to pedagogical experiments, faithful women have always inspired reformers (for example, Ovide Decroly and John Dewey).



It was also important that the director was a man. During the postwar period in the schools of Latvia, male teachers had become an “endangered species”.<sup>37</sup> Children who lived in school dormitories away from their families were looking for parents; “[they] needed someone to admire”<sup>38</sup> and the director – as one of the interviewees remembered – was “like a father”.<sup>39</sup> The young teacher was a director with a mission who became, to borrow Taylor’s phrase, the “facilitator, interrogator, and manipulator” of the group.<sup>40</sup> He assumed an authoritative, yet benevolent nurturing role and soon all school life came to revolve around the school theatre.

The director was gifted with the ability to screen everyone and to assign the right person to the right job. He knew how to find a place and activity for everyone – including those who were not born actors.<sup>41</sup> “Willing participants were many. I was so disappointed, but then the director said: ‘You will be the prompter!’ At the time, I didn’t even know what that was.”<sup>42</sup> The director was able to see the value in everyone; he did not grade actors or technical workers,<sup>43</sup> and sometimes the doers of “silent” work received greater appreciation from him.<sup>44</sup>

Performances started quite modestly in the 1960s (see Figure 3). The first plays were staged in ordinary classrooms that were emptied of desks. Students made the scenery and costumes themselves and worked with the sound and light devices. Girls decorated costumes with beads, struggled with thick fabrics, and were sometimes helped by the school’s cleaner. The boys learned to prepare masks and draw decorations. The theatre group was unified by one goal – a good performance. To attain this, they also needed practical skills to be able to complete less glamorous tasks, such as cleaning the stage after every performance. It was understood as a necessary task and even a sacred duty for the actors.<sup>45</sup>

As to practical matters, in the beginning, parents and teachers helped the theatre, and later former students also gave assistance in various ways, as many of them had acquired specialised education – they choreographed dances, used recorded music, and drew costume designs for the plays: “Everyone tried to help.”<sup>46</sup> Assisting the theatre group required the acquisition of new skills. One student, who attended art school, was given the task of drawing sketches for costume designs – she researched history books and consulted with professional seamstresses in fashion shops.<sup>47</sup>

Students who performed technical duties (see Figures 4 and 5) aroused a special interest in me: “Was it possible that they did not want to participate in the plays as actors? Didn’t they feel hurt to have this humble ‘supporting’ role?” However, I did not find any bitterness

<sup>37</sup>In 1959 in the Latvian SSR, of the workers in the field of education, science, and the arts, 74.9% were women and only 25.1% were men. See *Itogi vsesojuznoi perepisi naselenija 1959 goda. Latvjskaja SSR* [Soviet Union 1959 Census Results. Latvian SSR] (Moskva: Gosstatizdat CSU SSSR, 1963), 37.

<sup>38</sup>Interview no. 3, May 17, 2015.

<sup>39</sup>Interview no. 5, May 20, 2015 and Interview no. 2, May 11, 2015.

<sup>40</sup>Taylor, *The Drama Classroom*, 12.

<sup>41</sup>Interview no. 5, May 20, 2015.

<sup>42</sup>Slūka, “Manas atmiņas par skolas teātra gadiem – vislabākās” 17.

<sup>43</sup>Interview no. 3, May 17, 2015.

<sup>44</sup>Interview no. 2, May 11, 2015.

<sup>45</sup>Sweeping the stage was mentioned by several respondents, and this scene also appears in the cinema magazine “Pionieris” [Pioneer], 1983, no. 1, *Collection of the Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents*.

<sup>46</sup>Interview no. 1, May 10, 2015.

<sup>47</sup>Jogita Sipola, “Teātris ir viens liels noslēpums” [Theatre is one big secret], in Lapsiņš, ed., “*Sprīdītis*” *laimīgajā zemē*, 133.



**Figure 3.** Scene from a performance at the Valmiera School Theatre, 1967. Photo from the personal archive of Inese Kestere.



**Figure 4.** Rehearsal with light and sound devices, 1980s. Director and student. Photo from the personal archive of Inese Kestere.

in their memories. “Somebody had to do the things we did,” one said.<sup>48</sup> “We felt that we belonged. We felt like we were one of a kind. Each of us. It was the art and skill of the director to create this feeling.”<sup>49</sup> “He taught us how to love the stage. I accepted everything. But to be on the stage – no. I was fine with what I had.”<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup>Interview no. 5, May 20, 2015.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Interview no. 4, May 19, 2015.



**Figure 5.** Creation of scenery, 1980s. Director with students. Photo from the personal archive of Inese Kestere.

One can believe the sincerity of the statements made by those who had technical jobs, because some of these students went on to pursue careers in fields they had first experienced in the school theatre. One can therefore assume they were satisfied with their roles in the theatre. A student who was responsible for the lighting and sound devices in the theatre from 1978 to 1981 became an engineer for the electrical power network and is happily working in this profession to this very day.<sup>51</sup> A girl who was responsible for the theatre costumes in 1968 is today a teacher of junior grades, and she stages plays with children and takes part in amateur theatre herself.<sup>52</sup> All the interviews and published memoirs acknowledged that they are happy with their present occupations and are grateful to the director, because he was the one who led them to their most appropriate occupation.

### **Actors: the team spirit and elitism**

The activities of the Valmiera School Theatre were so successful that in 1975, a special theatre class was opened.<sup>53</sup> This meant that 30 students in one secondary school grade followed a specially developed curriculum where, besides general education subjects, they also had theatre and art history, ethics and aesthetics, rhetoric, and eurhythmics. These subjects were taught by professional actors. The teachers were motivated mainly by enthusiasm and belief

<sup>51</sup>Interview no. 5, May 20, 2015.

<sup>52</sup>Interview no. 4, May 19, 2015.

<sup>53</sup>A. Upeniece-Skudra, "Varbūt uz Valmieru ..." [Maybe to Valmiera ...], *Padomju Jaunatne*, June 10, 1975.

in a good cause, because they were paid a ridiculously small amount of money, considering the time and effort they devoted to the programme.<sup>54</sup> Repeatedly in their memories, respondents note unselfish help given to the school theatre and, once again, the director got the gratitude because he “knew how to talk to people. People did not do things because it was their obligation.”<sup>55</sup> He “knew everyone. Everyone was very cooperative.”<sup>56</sup> Assisting the famous school theatre became a source of pride for the pupils, the parents, graduates, and the entire Valmiera community.

Admissions to the theatre class took place every two years; only the best were accepted. Students came from all over the country. In their previous schools, they had been successful elocutionists, musicians, or singers, but had not regularly performed theatre. The exam consisted of reciting poetry, reading prose, singing, demonstrating a sense of rhythm, and performing mime.<sup>57</sup> Sometimes two or three youngsters had to compete for one position. Notification of acceptance was sent by post. This was anxiously awaited, and some have kept their acceptance letters until today.<sup>58</sup> I interviewed a former student who failed to get into the theatre class, but she still chose to attend school in Valmiera, away from home, so she could be close to the school theatre. She said that she really admired everyone who studied in the theatre class: “They were [...] put on a pedestal for me.”<sup>59</sup>

Competition for a position in the theatre class divided students into winners and losers. All respondents and many memoir authors acknowledged the elitism of the theatre class, but also the fact that the actors deserved to feel special, like heroes: “Yes, yes, the theatre class was elitist. We had the feeling that we are special. I don’t even remember the other classes.”<sup>60</sup> “We felt like the chosen ones.”<sup>61</sup> “The theatre class was the elite. Everyone wanted to be like them. Boys liked the girls from the theatre class.”<sup>62</sup> Actors “were viewed as elite personalities. As honourable personalities.”<sup>63</sup> Students from the theatre class were perceived with admiration, honour. People were interested in their private lives, as it is with actors.<sup>64</sup>

Being “the chosen” and its associated elitism played a role in building team spirit. A feeling of unity was also enhanced by the similar values and intentions of these young people, despite that fact they had arrived from all over Latvia.<sup>65</sup> They had been separated from their families and quickly found a “common language”, creating a “special atmosphere”.<sup>66</sup> The young people not only studied and performed together, but also attended dances, sang, went on excursions, played sports, worked on the *kolkhozes*,<sup>67</sup> weeded rows of beets, and

<sup>54</sup>Interview no. 1, May 10, 2015.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Interview no. 2, May 11, 2015.

<sup>57</sup>Laimonis Līdaka, “Mēs jutāmies kā mākslinieki” [We felt like professional artists], “Piecas no piektās teātra klases atmiņu stundā pie tējas tases” [Five from the fifth theatre class – reminiscing with a cup of tea], in Lapsiņš, ed., “*Sprīdītis*” *laimīgajā zemē*, 79, 165.

<sup>58</sup>Baiba Sīpeniece-Gavare, “Veiksmīgāku dzīves startu es nevaru iedomāties” [I can’t imagine a more successful start to life], in Lapsiņš, ed., “*Sprīdītis*” *laimīgajā zemē*, 192.

<sup>59</sup>Interview no. 8, June 5, 2015.

<sup>60</sup>Interview no. 3, May 17, 2015.

<sup>61</sup>Rasma Legzdiņa, “Mēs visi jutāmies piederīgi šim teātrim” [We all felt a sense of belonging to this theatre], in Lapsiņš, ed., “*Sprīdītis*” *laimīgajā zemē*, 26.

<sup>62</sup>Interview no. 1, May 10, 2015.

<sup>63</sup>Interview no. 4, May 19, 2015.

<sup>64</sup>Interview no. 8, June 5, 2015.

<sup>65</sup>Sīpeniece-Gavare, “Veiksmīgāku dzīves startu es nevaru iedomāties”, 195.

<sup>66</sup>Ingūna Vācmane, “Skatuve mums bija kā brīnums” [The stage was like a wonder to us], in Lapsiņš, ed., “*Sprīdītis*” *laimīgajā zemē*, 136.

<sup>67</sup>Work on *kolkhozes* was an obligatory activity in the summer months for students during the Soviet era.

got into mischief. Life in the dormitories was a special world in which they learned to get along with each other, as well as the teachers. “That’s where we misbehaved – we not only walked through doors, but also climbed through windows.”<sup>68</sup> In addition to “official” theatre performances, the youth also created their own plays; for example, *Othello* became a comedy with Desdemona in a blue nightgown on a squeaky, iron dormitory bed.<sup>69</sup>

Students of the theatre class had various privileges – they could attend professional theatre in Valmiera for free, and some students were even paid for participating in plays. Some of the other privileges granted to them were also considered important by the members: on the day of the performance, they were allowed to leave class early,<sup>70</sup> or the director “could walk into the middle of the lesson and pull you out [...] Teachers did not object; they did not dare to.”<sup>71</sup> “Actors were something special at school. We were able to walk out of lessons.”<sup>72</sup> Teachers were not always happy, as this disturbed the study process, but more than one former actor admits that the theatre, “not formal learning”, was for them the most important aspect at the Valmiera school.<sup>73</sup>

The Valmiera School Theatre was in the focus of the mass media. Press clippings from this period show that other school theatres were only briefly mentioned, but the main story was always devoted to the students from Valmiera.<sup>74</sup> The actors themselves admit that no other school theatre in Latvia could compete with their originality in direction, perfect lighting and music, or beautiful costumes.<sup>75</sup> The school and the Valmiera community were proud of this. Good reviews from the “world outside” made the members of the theatre feel even more loved and more special, strengthening the special bond between them. Students who did not attend the theatre class said: “We were proud of those who performed.”<sup>76</sup> “They had already achieved something in their lives. [...] They already had a plan. They had something specific to use in real life. They had real direction. They gained some additional opportunities, probably due specifically to the theatre.”<sup>77</sup>

### **Professionalism, perfectionism, and discipline**

Of course, students of the theatre class were required to act. At the beginning of the staging of a new play, the director asked all of them to sit in a circle and read the script. Usually, he had already thought through the casting of the characters, but this could change. “He understood who was capable of what [...] A teacher was good at spotting talent. He required more from them.”<sup>78</sup> “Nobody was offended. Everyone accepted both big and small roles. I liked that he involved big and small kids [...] He even created some roles.”<sup>79</sup>

<sup>68</sup>“Piecas no piektās teātra klases atmiņu stundā pie tējas tases”, 172.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>70</sup>Legzdiņa, “Mēs visi jutāmies piederīgi šim teātrim”, 26.

<sup>71</sup>Interview no. 5, May 20, 2015.

<sup>72</sup>Interview no. 2, May 11, 2015.

<sup>73</sup>Slūka, “Manas atmiņas par skolas teātra gadiem – vislabākās”, Olmane, “Mums viņš bija VISS” [For us, he was everything], Tālvāldis Lasmanis, “Man bija milzīga vēlēšanās būt teātri” [I had a great desire to be in the theatre], in Lapsiņš, ed., “Sprīdītis” *laimīgajā zemē*, 19, 60, 110.

<sup>74</sup>From 1968 until 1988, 31 significant articles about the Valmiera School Theatre were published in the Soviet Latvian press.

<sup>75</sup>Elga Olmane, “Mums viņš bija VISS” [For Us, He Was EVERYTHING], in Lapsiņš, ed., “Sprīdītis” *laimīgajā zemē*, 61.

<sup>76</sup>Interview no. 4, May 19, 2015.

<sup>77</sup>Interview no. 7, June 2, 2015.

<sup>78</sup>Interview no. 2, May 11, 2015.

<sup>79</sup>Interview no. 4, May 19, 2015.



The “dress rehearsal” usually took place during the New Year’s Eve celebration<sup>80</sup> for the students of the school, who then evaluated it. Later, in March or April, the official premiere for the wider public was held.<sup>81</sup> Before the performance, the director liked to remind actors: “Don’t bring them leftover cabbage that is warmed up; every time you have to relive it all, not play something that has already happened.”<sup>82</sup> Performances by the Valmiera school remained emotional, impressive, and moving in the memories of the audience.<sup>83</sup>

Performances took place not only in their school and other schools around the country, but also in clubs, churches, factories, and outdoors. Most of the performances were meant for the local community, but they also performed elsewhere in Latvia, and some performances were broadcast on television. Performances were put on several times, but in general, the run was not long. Actors finished the school and moved away from town, because there were no higher education establishments in Valmiera at the time. On the one hand, the short life of performances was sad, but on the other hand, each became a special event: “A huge effort was invested in every play, and every play was a celebration.”<sup>84</sup>

Both the public and theatre critics were thrilled by the performances as the actors played with great enthusiasm. Due to the outstanding popularity of “Sprīdītis”, functionaries and teachers from other schools made official visits to the Valmiera school, and educational seminars for other school theatre directors were held there under the guidance of the director.<sup>85</sup> In 1977, the school theatre was awarded the honorary title “Community Theatre”. This title meant more funding, but stricter rules were also applied – there had to be a new play every year and the theatre group was required to participate in competitions where professional critics evaluated the performances.

The theatre productions became increasingly professional, both in content and form (see Figures 6 and 10). A special auditorium with a stage was built in the school; it was fitted out with lighting and sound systems, costumes were ordered from professional dressmakers, music was recorded in studios, professional photographers were hired, and playbills and posters were printed. Former students recall the wonderful dress for Cinderella, a dress “of blue with embroidery”,<sup>86</sup> and the wigs that were imported from Moscow. It was a time when many things could not be acquired in what we would consider a normal way. Nice fabrics and foreign music were not available to the average Soviet person.<sup>87</sup> Despite this fact, the director managed to acquire special goods with the assistance of his former students, parents, and members of the community. Even simple playbills, posters, and programmes were printed with great difficulty under the watchful eye of the censors. In other words, the director knew how to “work the system”.

School theatre actors were taught that results mattered – the play needed to be perfect. To achieve the desired results, the director was even allowed to shout at the students. “Wishes

<sup>80</sup>Christmas as a religious holiday was forbidden in the Soviet Union.

<sup>81</sup>Interview no. 2, May 11, 2015.

<sup>82</sup>Maija Mežka, “Eju, eju pasaulē ...” [I go into the world], in Lapsiņš, ed., “*Sprīdītis*” *laimīgajā zemē*, 139.

<sup>83</sup>Legzdīņa, “Mēs visi jutāties piederīgi šim teātrim”, 27.

<sup>84</sup>Interview no. 2, May 11, 2015.

<sup>85</sup>L. Kanskis, “Kursi skolu režisoriem” [Courses for school theatre directors], *Cīņa*, August 11, 1970.

<sup>86</sup>Maija Deguna, “Skolēnu teātris ‘Sprīdītis’ – mana dzīves skola” [School theatre “sprīdītis” – my school of life] in Lapsiņš, ed., “*Sprīdītis*” *laimīgajā zemē*, 55.

<sup>87</sup>Daina Bleiere, *Eiropa ārpus Eiropas ... Dzīve Latvijas PSRS* [Europe outside of Europe ... life in the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic] (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2015), 122.



**Figure 6.** Scene from the performance of *The Princess and the Pea*, 1986–87. Photo: Voldemārs Vanadziņš.

expressed in his booming voice were law.”<sup>88</sup> He could be ironic, and his stare could “put you in your place”.<sup>89</sup> He would also take everything to the highest level, be unpredictable, and was compared to a volcano more than once (see Figure 7). Students could be kicked out of the theatre for infringement of rules. Discipline was very strict, and students were not allowed to miss rehearsals. While they were working, silence ruled, and no one was allowed to eat on stage or walk about in street shoes. Students had to arrive two hours before the show but needed to clear the stage and store costumes and wigs immediately after the performance. If necessary, students were required to assist in the maintenance of the theatre by standing

<sup>88</sup>Laima Drande, “Dzīvē noderīgo iemācījos Viesturskolas teātrī” [The most important things in life I learned in Viesturschool theatre], in Lapsiņš, ed., “*Sprīdītis*” *laimīgajā zemē*, 152.

<sup>89</sup>Sipeniece-Gavare, “Veiksmīgāku dzīves stratu es nevaru iedomāties”, 195.



**Figure 7.** Director and his assistant during rehearsal, 1980s. Photo from the personal archive of Inese Kestere.



**Figure 8.** Performance for school graduates, 1964. Portrait of Lenin on the stage. Photo from the personal archive of Inese Kestere.





**Figure 9.** After the performance of *Anna Louise and Anton* [Püñktchen und Anton], 1974–75. Director in the centre. Photo from the personal archive of Inese Kestere.

on scaffolding to wash the ceiling until one in the morning.<sup>90</sup> This was mentioned several times: “order in the theatre was like in the army;”<sup>91</sup> “nobody would even think of raising objections. Nobody complained [...] it was not allowed to be late, it was not allowed to squeak;”<sup>92</sup> “I was drilled, because, heaven forbid, I did something imperfect in the play. His look was enough.”<sup>93</sup> Sometimes the students chose to quit the theatre: “Some left because it was too hard for them.”<sup>94</sup>

However, the respondents always justified the actions of the director; he knew how to scold, but he was always just. “He was able to scold and also caress. He knew how to find the balance.”<sup>95</sup> “Never – not then, not now – have I held anything against my teacher, that he did anything bad to me. Any reprimands were deserved, because he could not stand irresponsibility or a lackadaisical attitude towards the job at hand.”<sup>96</sup> Compliments of the highest level for the director were expressed in almost every interview and all published memoirs.<sup>97</sup> The titles of many articles reveal the sentiment of the memories: “For us, he was

<sup>90</sup>Drande, “Dzīvē noderīgo iemācījos Viesturskolas teātri”, 152.

<sup>91</sup>Interview no. 2, May 11, 2015.

<sup>92</sup>Interview no. 4, May 19, 2015.

<sup>93</sup>Interview no. 5, May 20, 2015.

<sup>94</sup>Interview no. 1, May 10, 2015.

<sup>95</sup>Interview no. 5, May 20, 2015.

<sup>96</sup>Anita Viksna, “Mans laiks Viesturskolā un skolas teātrī” [My Time in Viesturschool and the School Theatre], in Lapsiņš, ed., “Sprīdītis” *laimīgajā zemē*, 14.

<sup>97</sup>The director staged performances up to the very last moment of his life in 1999 and had already prepared a successor for his work – a 1982 theatre class graduate. The new director worked in Valmiera for 15 years and has now become the “old” director, because now he is assisted by a younger colleague. Students are enrolled in the theatre class every year, the number of actors has grown considerably, and they continue to stage several performances a year. In 2015, the eightieth anniversary of the director’s birth was widely celebrated in the Valmiera school.



**Figure 10.** Scene from the performance of *The Adventures of Sinbad*, 1985–86. Photo: Voldemārs Vanadzīņš.

EVERYTHING”; “The most important things in life I learned in Viesturschool theatre”; “I can’t imagine a more successful start to life”, and so on.<sup>98</sup>

### Repertoire of the school theatre

In all the interviews, I asked similar questions and the answers were also, more or less, similar. The only question to which respondents had completely different answers was: “How did the director choose a play to perform?” Respondents explained that the director wanted to express his fantasy, that he did not like mundane or realistic theatre,<sup>99</sup> or that he was searching for a play with many dramatic characters in order to find roles for as many

<sup>98</sup>Title of articles in Lapsiņš, ed., “*Sprīdītis*” *laimīgajā zemē*.

<sup>99</sup>Interview no. 1, May 10, 2015; “Piecas no piektās teātra klases atmiņu stundā pie tējas tases”, 171.



students as possible.<sup>100</sup> Occasionally he would have a specific member of the group in mind for a particular role: “He saw in advance who was able to be the leading force of the [play]. He was able to find the most suitable actor for each role”,<sup>101</sup> or “He could not stand unprofessional speech” and therefore, he refused to stage classic plays and chose dance and rhythmic performances.<sup>102</sup> The choice of the play was also important financially.<sup>103</sup> Perhaps a significant factor in these choices was the director’s own impoverished childhood: the theatre was his chance to realise his world of fantasy – richly and colourfully.

Respondents mentioned neither ideology, nor politics in the choice of repertoire, but a definite canon ruled the arts in the Soviet Union: you needed to praise the current regime, extoll its basic principles, and “bow” before Russian culture – that of the “big brother”<sup>104</sup> (see Figure 8). Research on the Valmiera School Theatre repertoire and direct questioning of the respondents revealed how dues were paid to the Soviet regime. For example, in 1970, the theatre staged a Russian play with the following storyline: the main character, a Soviet boy, Vitya, is not satisfied with his monotonous life, and he complains that he was not born earlier when there were possibilities to become a hero. With the help of a magician, he is transported to various eras of the past – he visits cave men, French musketeers, and Russia during the Civil War. The playbill noted that “the Soviet boy, Vitya, cannot fit into other social structures; he can’t understand the injustice or the cruelty that dominated there. Vitya is deeply disappointed by his imaginary heroes”.<sup>105</sup> The message is clear – Vitya can be happy only now, in the present, in the Soviet Union.

Another play expounding the propaganda of the Soviet worldview was *Humans and Gods* performed in 1961–62. It had an anti-religious plot that ridiculed both the clergy and also the faithful. The plot of the play illustrated the communist thesis “God doesn’t exist” and that religion is deceiving the nation.

To honour the anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx, his letters were read. One actor asked a question, and the other actors replied with texts by Marx. In the centre of the stage was the slogan “Doubt Everything”. In the 1970s, when the Soviet leader was Leonid Brezhnev, the motto was “Fight for Peace”, and the school theatre also created a poetry performance devoted to the theme of war and peace.<sup>106</sup>

All these plays were noted in the interviews and memoirs, but no connections were made to the ideology expressed within them: the audience remembered the interesting war scenes<sup>107</sup> and one actor noted how great it was to fence in the role of a musketeer and how amusingly his friend portrayed a naïve peasant.<sup>108</sup> Respondents remember that Karl Marx was “depicted in a very human manner”,<sup>109</sup> and one former student characterised the performance about the defence of peace with following words: “It was very touching. I cried.”<sup>110</sup>

<sup>100</sup>Interview no. 2, May 11, 2015.

<sup>101</sup>Interview no. 5, May 20, 2015.

<sup>102</sup>Interview no. 3, May 17, 2015.

<sup>103</sup>Interview no. 2, May 11, 2015.

<sup>104</sup>See Andrejs Plakans, *The Concise History of The Baltic States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 374, 380.

<sup>105</sup>*Pāri jumta korei. Programma* [Above the gable. Playbill] (Valmiera: 1970).

<sup>106</sup>The complete list of performances can be found in Lapsiņš, ed., “*Spriditis*” *laimīgajā zemē*, 353–9.

<sup>107</sup>Interview no. 6, March 3, 2015.

<sup>108</sup>Interview no. 2, May 11, 2015.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid.

<sup>110</sup>Interview no. 8, June 5, 2015.



**Figure 11.** Scene from the performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, 1981. Photo from the personal archive of Inese Kestere.

From 1958 to 1990, the school theatre, under the guidance of the director, staged a total of 42 plays – one or two plays per year. Primarily, fairy tales were staged (51.2% of the repertoire), followed by dramas (28.5%), poetry performances (14.2%), and dance performances (7.1%). Among the performances, we can find the fairy tales of Andersen: *The Swineherd* (1963–64; 1979–80); *The Princess and the Pea* (1986–87); and *About the Mirror and its Pieces* (1975–76); along with *Cinderella* (1965–66); *Aladdin's Magic Lamp* (1976–77), *The Adventures of Sinbad* (1985–86) (see Figure 10); and a story by Erich Kastner, *Anna Louise and Anton* [Pünktchen und Anton] (1974–75) (see Figure 9). Some plays were staged repeatedly.<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup>Lapsiņš, ed., “Spridītis” laimīgajā zemē, 353–6.

The most famous performance by the Valmiera School Theatre, unforgotten by all who saw it, was *Romeo and Juliet* in 1981–82 (see Figure 11). When asked why this specific play was staged, the respondents answered: “Because we had actors.”<sup>112</sup> A 17-year-old boy played Romeo and later became a professional actor; Juliet was a 16-year-old girl who did not try to become an actress, but entered art school. The performance of *Romeo and Juliet* was reported in the press, and it was also broadcast on TV. One of the actresses noted: “People stood in line by the concert hall for two hours before the beginning of the performance and begged to see *Romeo and Juliet*.”<sup>113</sup> The auditorium was overflowing. People sat on benches, stood, and even sat on the floor next to the stage decorations. Many say that to this day, they compare this student play with every professional *Romeo and Juliet* performance.<sup>114</sup> A famous theatre set designer remembers this performance, even after 30 years, as: “The most beautiful *Romeo and Juliet* I have ever seen [...]. Such honesty! Like a confession. [...] That was real theatre with genuine emotions.”<sup>115</sup>

## Findings

Reading and listening to the memoirs of the members of the school theatre, it is easy to note witnesses attesting to the changes in the students’ knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviour towards culture. In other words, they all admit that they learned about culture through the theatre, and all admit that they were/are delighted about this. The more challenging task is to discern how the acquisition of culture actually occurred.

In class, the students acquired formal, institutionalised, and assessed knowledge about cultural heritage, that is, theatre art – literature, history of the arts, and theatre history. This theoretical knowledge was put into practice immediately in the school theatre. The actor students could emotionally affect the audience, as noted in the memories about *Romeo and Juliet*. The viewers’ comments on their excitement attest to the ability of the students to reflect on cultural heritage and thus make it understandable to their contemporaries.

During the process of preparing the play, the students had to learn specific skills or methodology of how to act – to perform in public, speak, sing, and dance: “Skills to remember. Ability to speak slowly. Listen to the others.”<sup>116</sup> The theatre also developed problem-solving skills – how to deal with unexpected situations, such as forgetting lines or if a mishap occurs on stage. Practical skills included working with lights, sound, costume design, and stage decorations, which were all necessary to guarantee the technical success of each play. These practical skills became “added value” to cultural knowledge.

The knowledge applied, skills used, and work invested in the production of a performance developed a certain attitude towards the theatre, as well as culture as an overall value. Testimony to this is revealed in the later lives of the students. Many of the former students have become regular, enthusiastic, and interested theatre-goers. Many continue to participate in amateur theatre groups, and others have become teachers who produce their

<sup>112</sup>Interview no. 1, May 10, 2015; interview no. 3, May 17, 2015.

<sup>113</sup>Maija Mežka, “Eju, eju pasaulē ...”, 138.

<sup>114</sup>Drande, “Dzīvē noderīgo iemācījos Viesturskolas teātri”, 153.

<sup>115</sup>Zane Radzobe, “Degošais akmens”, intervija ar scenogrāfu Andri Freibergu [“Burning Stone”, interview with stage designer Andris Freibergs], *Māksla Plus* [Art plus] 2 (2010), quoted in Lapsiņš, ed., “Sprīdītis” laimīgajā zemē, 142.

<sup>116</sup>Interview no. 4, May 19, 2015.

students' plays or produce plays for their own children. They are able to perform without a lot of preparation and are not afraid of the audience. "As a teacher, each of my lessons is like a theatre performance."<sup>117</sup> A graduate, who has worked for 20 years in the technical production of professional theatre, notes that this gives her great satisfaction, and "it is quite lucky to be involved in the constantly creative world of theatre."<sup>118</sup> The theatre continues to be a very special place for all these students. They not only learned that the stage was not to be walked on in street shoes, but also that the audience should not watch a play in boots, but rather in shoes.<sup>119</sup> Culture continued to play a role in the daily lives of former students, and the knowledge and skills acquired in the school theatre were transferred to new contexts. This affirms that culture was acknowledged and understood.

An unexpected discovery was the fact that school theatre was also very important for the students who did not want to join the theatre. The theatre could not go unnoticed in school, and other students looked at the actors with respect – as people who "already had something specific to use in real life."<sup>120</sup> The positive attitude of those students not involved with the theatre highlights the role of school as a place to acquire cultural knowledge, as opposed to the view of school as a place of business (*Wirtschaftsunternehmen*), that is, an institution that hands down knowledge and whose offering is based solely on economic needs.<sup>121</sup>

A significant factor in the development of knowledge and attitudes is the fact that theatre is a collective art form, where people with a single and difficult goal share the same norms and values. It appears that the most important thing for the actors, technical workers, and fans of the Valmiera School Theatre was to be "part of something"; to "belong". In order not to lose attachment to these people who were personally significant, members had to adapt their individuality to the collective, namely, integrate into the social control system. A control is based on shared norms and values that set expectations about appropriate attitudes and behaviour for members of the group.<sup>122</sup> It was precisely the social, rather than formal, controls which created a sense of responsibility towards each production by making everything perfect and professional. Responsibility was a strong motive for learning, namely, improving everybody's individual knowledge and skills with the aim of contributing to the common good.

Theatre is an art form that cannot exist without an audience. The school theatre was closely tied not only to the school collective, but also the entire community of the city of Valmiera; the inhabitants were enthusiastic and supportive viewers, who willingly volunteered to give assistance and expressed pride in the theatre group's accomplishments. This support extended to students, who had come from all over Latvia and later scattered throughout the world, and left a lasting sense of belonging not only to their school, but also to the Valmiera community. Shared experiences, emotions, and memories continue to bind. Even after many years in Riga, some former students note: "I feel a sense of belonging to Valmiera even today – like a local."<sup>123</sup>

<sup>117</sup>Slūka, "Manas atmiņas par skolas teātra gadiem – vislabākās", 19.

<sup>118</sup>Anita Valmiera, "Trīs nozīmīgi gadi pasaules paplašināšanā" [Three significant years in expanding the world], in Lapsiņš, ed., "Sprīdītis" laimīgajā zemē, 29.

<sup>119</sup>Piecas no piektās teātra klases atmiņu stundā pie tējas tases", 169.

<sup>120</sup>Interview no. 7, June 2, 2015.

<sup>121</sup>For more on the modern school as a business, as opposed to a cultural institution, see Günther Böhme, *Kultur un pädagogische Reform. Zur Aktualität einer humanistischen Bildung* (Ildstein: Schulz-Kirchner Verlag, 2008), 50–1.

<sup>122</sup>Charles A. O'Reilly and Jennifer A. Chatman, "Culture as Social Control: Corporations, Cults, and Commitment," *Research in Organization Behavior* 18 (1996): 160.

<sup>123</sup>Interview no. 3, May 17, 2015.

A strong sense of belonging to a group that has unified goals and values creates a group identity that sets the group apart from others. The feature of all cultures is the struggle for distinction.<sup>124</sup> The creation of a separate world – locally embedded but isolated and a safe hub<sup>125</sup> – in a Latvian school through theatre performed in Latvian for Latvian viewers was a clear contradiction to the communist identity created by the Soviet Union.<sup>126</sup> Ironically, the oppressive authoritarian regime, which strongly supported creative school activities, missed their transformation into a more-or-less conscious form of resistance against a foreign identity. These activities built a bank of resources for the development of a new or renewed sense of identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

However, there are only two memoirs that mention the political regime. This seems unusual considering that during the entire period of Soviet rule, political censors, as previously mentioned, controlled all cultural activities. One of the former students recalled how the theatre ensemble sang a forbidden song dedicated to their homeland – Latvia – during a Valmiera town festival.<sup>127</sup> Another student recalled how during a trip to Georgia, the director remained on the bus while the students went to the Stalin Museum. “It was the Soviet era, and that was a brave move [...] with his passive actions and his silence, he strengthened our hatred towards the ruling regime.”<sup>128</sup>

It is quite possible that the political “blindness” expressed by most of the former students can be attributed to the director. With the help of a genuine art form and a world of fantasy, the students were protected from the authoritarian regime, or at least their special, creative world was distanced from politics. Even artistically substandard Soviet propaganda plays were transformed into works of art. The director staged everything at such a high artistic level that “we did not feel the ideology.”<sup>129</sup> Continuing this thought, Soviet propaganda was transformed into art by highlighting general human values – friendship, justice, and patriotism.

I did not encounter a single person among the former members of the theatre who described his/her activities in the school theatre in a negative light or who disclosed any negative nuances. On the contrary, the memories repeatedly stressed how the years spent in the theatre world influenced and enriched the lives and personalities of the students. Valmiera was a “revolution in my life, [...] without this school I would be completely different.”<sup>130</sup> “Three years that really, really influenced my future.”<sup>131</sup> One of the respondents, however, discovered a certain paradox: “Some think it was the best time of their lives. To me, that sounds a bit strange ...”<sup>132</sup>

<sup>124</sup>Jerome Bruner, “Tenets to Understand a Cultural Perspective of Learning,” in *Teaching, Learning and the Curriculum in Secondary Schools*, ed. Bob Moon, Ann Shelton Mayers and Steven Hutchinson (London: Routledge Falmer, 2007), 19.

<sup>125</sup>Here, similarities can be found with Grosvenor and Pataki’s descriptions of alternative creative learning spaces – arts and craft colonies and experimental schools. See Ian Grosvenor and Gyöngyver Pataki, “Learning through Culture: Seeking ‘Critical Case Studies of Possibilities’ in the History of Education,” *Paedagogica Historica*. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2016.1264981>

<sup>126</sup>See Maria Mälksoo, “Introduction,” in *Historical Memory Versus Communist Identity. Proceedings of the Conference “The Shaping of Identity and Personality under Communist Rule: History in the Service of Totalitarian Regimes in Eastern Europe,” Tallinn, 9–10 June 2011*, ed. Meelis Saueauk (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014), 13.

<sup>127</sup>Zane Bēķe, “Sprīdītis’ – īpaša kvalitātes zīme visam mūžam” [“Sprīdītis” – a life-long symbol of quality], in Lapsiņš, ed., “Sprīdītis” *laimīgajā zemē*, 156.

<sup>128</sup>Sipeniece-Gavare, “Veiksmīgāku dzīves stratu es nevaru iedomāties”, 197.

<sup>129</sup>Interview no. 5, May 20, 2015.

<sup>130</sup>Sipeniece-Gavare, “Veiksmīgāku dzīves stratu es nevaru iedomāties”, 200.

<sup>131</sup>“Piecas no piektās teātra klases atmiņu stundā pie tējas tases”, 177.

<sup>132</sup>Interview no. 3, May 17, 2015.



Before beginning this study, I assumed that the majority of the members of the school theatre wanted to become actors, but this was not the case. I presume that some may have hidden this desire, but only a few of the graduates from the Valmiera School Theatre applied to the Theatre Faculty at the Latvian Conservatory where actors were trained during the Soviet era. Only four of the former members of the Valmiera School Theatre have become professional actors and two are famous television stars. Most have other occupations – many of them are teachers and many work in the field of culture, but there are also doctors, entrepreneurs, engineers, and lawyers.

The lack of the desire to become an actor might be explained by the fact that members of the school theatre had already had the chance to test their abilities and decide whether they were suited for this occupation or not. “I have never wanted to be an actor because I was never convinced that I would be a good one. I wanted to be a teacher.”<sup>133</sup> Nevertheless, participation in the theatre allowed them to find their place in other occupations. It created a group of people with imagination, which is also necessary for solving problems in society,<sup>134</sup> and widened their perspectives for future employment. Cultural learning and social learning are very much related.

Ironically, the only person who admitted that the school theatre did not play an exclusively positive role in his life is a professional actor. The school theatre created the illusion that he was already prepared for an acting career. Perhaps professionalism in school theatre is just an illusion.

If there is cultural learning, then there is also cultural teaching – passing on knowledge and skills, like any human exchange, involves a sub-community in interaction; as a minimum, it involves a “teacher” and a “learner”.<sup>135</sup> As the memoirs indicate, the personality of the director played a distinct role in the lives of young people – he guided them into the world of culture. But in this case, it differed completely from the usual method of free, creative experiments with “no formal curriculum, no discipline, and no punishment”,<sup>136</sup> where even the smell of anarchy is in the air.<sup>137</sup> Strong discipline and order ruled in the Valmiera School Theatre. In this way, the director taught the students not just acting, but instilled in them a specific “value agenda”,<sup>138</sup> which included culture, aesthetics, and ethics, such as a positive attitude towards work, responsibility for the group effort, and care for others. Ironically, however, at the same time the disciplined school theatre environment was in opposition to the authoritarian Soviet order.

Both the students and the director were happy with their role. School theatre was a wonderful place to fulfil the director’s fantasies and dreams, and the actors were the vehicles for fulfilling these desires.<sup>139</sup> Children are artists and culture-makers by nature;<sup>140</sup> they are thrilled to become easily malleable material in the hands of the teacher – director. Creative synergy between cultural learning and teaching processes were beneficial for both sides. And if we view cultural learning through the modern and pragmatic competence-based learning focus, then we can only agree with Klapecki’s view that school theatre helps acquire a wide range of competences – self-competence, social competence, methodological competence, and aesthetic competence.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>133</sup>Slūka, “Manas atmiņas par skolas teātra gadiem – vislabākās”, 18.

<sup>134</sup>Peter Brinson, *Dance as Education: Towards a National Dance Culture* (London: Routledge Falmer, 1991), 57–8.

<sup>135</sup>Bruner, “Tenets to Understand a Cultural Perspective of Learning,” 13.

<sup>136</sup>Grosvenor and Pataki, “Learning through Culture: Seeking ‘Critical Case Studies of Possibilities’ in the History of Education,” 9.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid.

<sup>138</sup>Joe Winston, *Drama, Narrative, and Moral Education: Exploring Traditional Tales in the Primary Years* (London: Falmer Press, 1998), 8.

<sup>139</sup>Lasmanis, “Man bija milzīga vēlēšanās būt teātri”, 112.

<sup>140</sup>Abbs, *Against the Flow*, 55.

<sup>141</sup>Tanja Klepacki, *Bildungsprozesse im Schultheater. Eine ethnographische Studie* (Münster: Waxmann, 2016), 23.

My research also encouraged reflection on the school theatre as a very special place for cultural learning. First of all, learning and practising in school theatres take place simultaneously and for a limited period of time. Students are driven by sense of competition. In theatre, formal distribution by age is abolished and “newcomers” in school watch the older students, whom they must catch up, if not surpass. Thus, learning takes place as quickly as possible and in a very concentrated form. Secondly, a sense of belonging is very important during the teenage years, and the theatre, as a collective art form, can fulfil that need completely. A sense of belonging creates responsibility and becomes a strong motivation for successful learning. Lastly, the school theatre had no professional material base. Thus, the theatre group was dependent on the community, not only as the audience during performances, but also for daily support in the staging of plays. Common experience, emotions, and shared memories strengthened the students’ sense of belonging to a particular place in Latvia and developed a strong sense of cultural identity.

While noting the theatre’s positive investment in developing the individual personalities of its members and the community as a whole, my case study revealed some sensitive problems, or some possible sources of conflict that could be considered characteristic of every creative activity at school: (1) school theatre produces an elite – the competition to become an actor might divide students in losers and winners; (2) evaluation and striving for perfect results requires the involvement of increasingly more professionals in the work of the theatre and that, in turn, marginalises the contribution of the students themselves and we can only agree with Abbs that “teachers are driven by the needs of assessment [...] Assessment itself now preponderantly *drives* education”;<sup>142</sup> (3) if the leader’s value is based on the results of his/her employees, then the control mechanisms circle back upon the subordinates and become even stricter,<sup>143</sup> which can lead to an authoritarian leadership style; and finally (4) the case study also reveals some sensitive issues between the knowledge-orientated environment of the school and the informal creativity of the school theatre, i.e. by becoming increasingly more popular and professional, the theatre gained the privilege to “steal” actors away from their studies, raising the question of how informal creative activities might be integrated less painfully into the environment of schooling.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the graduates of Valmiera Viesturs Secondary School, particularly teacher Māris Lapsiņš, for their time and support in the completion of my research.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Iveta Kestere* is a professor at the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art, University of Latvia and an expert in the history of education at the Latvian Council of Science. Her current academic interest is in research methodology for the history of education and education under dictatorship, including the history of school reality and the history of the teaching profession.

<sup>142</sup>Abbs, *Against the Flow*, 59.

<sup>143</sup>O’Reilly and Chatman, “Culture as Social Control: Corporations, Cults, and Commitment,” 163.