

DEAR GRANDMOTHER, HOW ARE YOU?  
THE INFLUENCE OF ANNA LĀCIS ON THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL THEATRE IN LATVIA\*

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From the right: Anna Lācis, Māra Ķimele, and Bernhard Reich in Murjāņi, 1960s, LSSR.  
Photo from the personal archive of Māra Ķimele.

Since the 1970s, Māra Ķimele, granddaughter of Anna Lācis, has been one of the most powerful and influential Latvian theatre directors. Many of Māra Ķimele's productions have become pivotal points in the development of Latvian theatre. Her complex personality and exquisitely interesting family, closely connected to the political and cultural history of Latvia throughout the twentieth century, were reasons why I decided to make the feature-length documentary *Māra* in 2013. Of course, the project was not possible without the presence of Anna Lācis, and not only because

granddaughter and grandmother are united in their choice of career. I was interested in the destiny of two great female artists in the context of power and politics.

The collection of the Latvian Literature and Music Museum holds the large, and still unused, epistolary archive of Anna Lācis. A small fraction of it consists of 51 letters that Māra Ķimele wrote to her grandmother between 1953 and 1978. They cover Māra's childhood impressions, college years, and work in the theatre. Only Māra's letters can be found in the archive, and they found their way there after her grandmother's death in 1979. Anna Lācis's replies to these letters have not been preserved. It is curious that Māra Ķimele herself had forgotten about the existence of these letters; using them in the film came as a surprise to her. Even though each of the letters starts with "Dear Grandmother!" and the style and topics of the letters seemingly point to the close connection between granddaughter and grandmother, the author of the letters denies such a closeness. The explanation is to be found in the memoirs of Anna Lācis's daughter, Dagmāra Ķimele: *Asja. Režisores Annas Lācis dēkainā dzīve* (70 *Asja: The Stormy Life of Director Anna Lācis*) (Ķimele and Strautmane). From her daughter's perspective, politics, revolution, and theatre were always more important to Anna Lācis than her family, her daughter and granddaughter. The fate of one photograph serves as an archetypal visual statement of this attitude and of Anna Lācis's willingness to take history-making into her own hands. It is a studio photograph in which Anna Lācis appears with her daughter Dagmāra when the latter was about five years old. Later on, in the 1960s or 1970s, she ordered a graceless photomontage to replace the daughter with Bertolt Brecht in this picture. Although Anna Lācis had really worked alongside Brecht, had been his assistant and, according to her own statements, had played a name-part in Brecht's premiere of *The Life of Edward II of England* in Munich, and had maintained a close relationship with him until his demise, there are no photographs of just the two of them. However, there are many photographs in which Bertolt Brecht is alongside her and Bernhard Reich in other ways, in the names of posters and books. Anyone who has worked with the photographs in Lācis's archival materials knows how much she liked being photographed with Brecht. The anecdote of the fake photograph is yet another testimonial on behalf of her loyalty to the ideas of political theatre, which manifested in Brecht's work.

In this article, I will quote several letters of Māra Ķimele to Anna Lācis that I included in the film and attempt to reveal the signs of the era embedded in them, proof of Anna Lācis's and Māra Ķimele's professional quests, and to relate them to the tradition of political theatre in contemporary Latvia. It can be said without a doubt that *Asja* was one of the brightest and most expressive pioneers of political theatre in Latvia in the 1920s, and contemporary Latvian artists can metaphorically call her a grandmother. The title of this article thus relates not only to the direct correspondence between Māra Ķimele and Anna Lācis, but also the willingness to commence a dialogue on the state of political art in Soviet and contemporary independent Latvia.

## FIRST LETTER: STALIN, SOCIALIST REALISM, AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL CULTURE IN LATVIAN ART

23. 10. 53.

Mīlo vecmāmiņ!

Kādel tu neatūtiņi neieriņi sātīgu va manu  
 dvimšanas dienā? Pēc manis ciemiņā dauda ne-  
 bija. Atnāca tikai Ināra, Miša, Mirdza un Muiš-  
 niķis. Ināra vadāvināja man šokolādes tāfāletī, bet  
 Muišniķis roselu <sup>piņst</sup> tortes kastī, pilnu ar cūcām.

Un Staļina \* dvimšanas dienai mums skolā bija  
 pionieru sarāesme. Šo tuu deklarēji daļjēli  
 „Gori namiņā.” Gau agrāk mēs vācām raudu  
 lai nopirktu albumu. Mēs nesām bildites par  
 Staļinu bērnišas un skolas gadiem. Daži bija  
 atnesuši tādas bildes, kādas es nekur vēl nebiju  
 redzējusi. Divi rēni un divas meitenes stāstīja  
 par Staļinu, tad bija ruru koris, bet pašās bei-  
 gās mēs sratyāmies albumu. Bet togad man jā-  
 mās, pļest. jau kāda 10/20. no rita.

Parveicini Raiker. Ķimēļumu gam Ķurta sarči-  
 pāja, bet tas nekas. Māra.

1953. g. 23. XII

Es vienreiz vaximēju tādu  
 un zem tā parāestīju: Un jūras sacēlās  
 vējs, lapu roces kas auga krastmalā sāka  
 šākt. Cpskratīes labi Ķimējumū un pasāri, kāpēc  
 viraests nesācrit ar Ķimējumū. (Tas nekas, ca šīti  
 vaximēti).

Dear Grandmother! Why didn't you send a postcard for my birthday? I didn't have many guests. Only Ināra, Miša, Mirdza and Muižnieks came. Ināra gave me a bar of chocolate, and Muižnieks brought a whole box full of cakes.

We had a pioneers' meeting at school for Stalin's birthday. I read the poem "In the Little House of Gori." We had already collected money to buy an album. We brought pictures of Stalin's childhood and school years. Some had brought pictures I had never seen anywhere before. Two boys and two girls talked about Stalin, then there was a speech choir, and at the very end we looked at the album. But now I have to study, the clock is already showing 10:20 in the morning. Say hello to Reich. Māra. 23 XII 1953. (Ķimele, First letter, 1953)

Māra Ķimele turned ten years old a few days before she wrote this letter. At the time, Anna Lācis was working as the main director at the Latvian SSR Leons Paegle State Drama Theatre in Valmiera, and it seems from the letter that she had not wished her granddaughter a happy birthday.

In order to understand the context in which the letter was written, one must  
**72** remember that Joseph Stalin, or Joseph Djugashvili, was the general secretary of the CPSU from 1922 until 1953—the leader of a totalitarian country, the architect of mass terror, murder, and genocide, under whose leadership the three Baltic states of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania were occupied in 1940. A small insight into the cult of Stalin's personality is provided by an eight-minute-long film made in 1939 with the same title as the poem, which, as the letter testifies, Māra Ķimele recited at school to honour the recently deceased leader for his birthday: "In the Little House of Gori" (<http://film.arjlover.net/info/domik.v.gori.avi.html>). This film accurately depicts the task of Soviet art in the ideological education of the nation: it thanks Georgia for giving the Soviet state its majestic son, it sings praise to the leader's childhood, and it shows the unity of workers of many ethnicities in the small town of Gori with the aim of bowing their heads before the two rooms of Stalin's birth home.

The film was shot at a time when the Red Terror, the deportation and mass murder of innocent people, was being executed in the Soviet Union under Stalin's leadership. In spite of her leftist views and faith in the proletarian revolution, Anna Lācis was also subject to this terror. In 1938, she was accused of espionage and imprisoned in Moscow. The majority of her Latvian friends and colleagues who were active in Moscow were already in jail, killed, or awaiting execution. For example, Linards Laicens, the Latvian poet, dramaturg, and close friend of Anna Lācis who created the "theatre of the persecuted" movement together with her in Latvia, was shot in 1937 in Moscow; Jūlijs Lācis, Anna Lācis's first husband and the father of her daughter Dagmāra, a well-known Latvian journalist and a minister of the first LSSR government of the occupation movement, was shot in 1941; and the whole ensemble of "Skatuve," the Latvian theatre in Moscow, was also killed. Anna Lācis was sent to a concentration camp in Kazakhstan SSR. She spent ten years there, as did Bernhard Reich, who, full of love, refused to abandon his relationship with Anna Lācis. Upon returning from the concentration camp in 1948, Lācis, and later Reich, like all ex-deportees, had no right to live and work in the big cities of the USSR. Only through

acquaintances was she able to get a job in a provincial theatre in Valmiera, a town 120 km from Riga, the capital of the Latvian SSR.

Young Māra Ķimele's letter about the celebration of the recently deceased Stalin's birthday taking place a day prior to her own birthday is intriguing for several reasons. First, the letter contains a precise description of the methods of ideological education in the Soviet Union, in which the leader's childhood had to become exemplary for each child. The act of mandatory donation is especially interesting. Children who, at the time, were mostly living in poverty were forced to collect money for an album to collect photographs of the leader's everyday activities. Also, the declamation of praise poems and the speech choir, in which children recite texts dedicated to the leader, reflect the role of literature and theatre at the time: to instill the only correct political opinion and unite the people around the communist ideology.

Second, the letter demonstrates the granddaughter's understanding of what her grandmother, who was at the time creating political and ideologically unambiguous productions, would find interesting or worthy of support. The letter provides a detailed description of the celebratory events, thus making it possible to picture their direction and the precise sequence of events, which indirectly correlates with Anna Lācis's own understanding of the artistic goal.

Based on the memories of Marija Adamova, an actress at the Valmiera Theatre and a loyal friend of Anna Lācis, it is possible to characterize the areas of artistic interest and methods in the post-war and post-exile period:

### *1. An ideologically clear repertoire selection*

Anna Lācis was interested in plays that applied the most significant and exciting processes of the creation of the new man to current events in the world; that connected personal, intimate topics with social and historical processes; that verified Soviet life, dealt with anti-religious and international topics; and that turned against war and depicted the developmental processes of individuals and society.

### *2. Educating the audience*

According to Marija Adamova:

In the years following the war, the audience was very uneven, the audience had various views of life and art. Anna Lācis understood the complexity of the political and aesthetic tasks of the theatre. For a part of the people, she had to overcome their inner resistance and develop an interest in politics, social issues. [...] With her productions, Anna Lācis made a conscious effort to pull the audience into issues of life. The Valmiera Theatre serviced vast regions of the republic, they visited the most remote corners, where, at times, a professional theatre appeared for the first time. We realized the mission of the theatre in educating the audience, especially those members of it who crossed many kilometers both in summer heat, autumn storms and dirt, and winter frost and snow blizzards to see our shows. (147, 148)

### *3. Political theatre as a work method*

Marija Adamova describes Anna Lācis's working method as part of the tradition of the "theatre of the persecuted" and principles of political theatre, one of whose

most essential elements is historicity, through which a real, specific modern day is reflected. Actors' recollections testify that Anna Lācis tried to implement the socialist realist method in her artistic work, which was defined in the USSR Union of Writers' statutes in 1934 and later applied to all areas of art. Socialist realism, which was the core method of Soviet art and criticism, demanded "a true, historically accurate portrayal of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the authenticity and historical accuracy of the artistic portrayal must correspond with the task to ideologically transform and re-educate working people in the spirit of socialism" (from the statutes of the USSR Union of Writers, cited in Undusk).

74 However, as Jaan Undusk points out in "The Fading Reality of Socialist Realism," there was no single unifying document in the Soviet Union that would describe socialist realism as a more or less clear totality of stylistic methods, neither in the area of art nor in criticism. It was implemented as a general term for the preparation of certain culturally political campaigns, as an ideological frame to ensure political discipline in the area of fine arts (72). Therefore, it was not a promotion standard for an ethical or aesthetic canon, but a starting point for formulating further demagogical strategies.

One cannot disagree with Jaan Undusk's main thesis that socialist realism was an instrument for ideological oppression in cultural and political campaigns against the creative intelligentsia, which supported a perpetual mental, and partly also physical, terror and "cleansing" among people used to too much freedom in their activities. Under these circumstances, many artists in the USSR, for their safety, searched for topics and means of expression that would be the least likely to be subject to criticism, thus creating an aesthetic of positivism to mask reality and a mythopoetic content subjected to ideology.

The case of Anna Lācis is especially curious in this context because both she and her relatives suffered from repressions in the USSR. Nevertheless, Anna Lācis continued her work based on the knowledge she had gained in Germany and Russia in the 1920s and 1930s and the short journey of creating an expressionist political theatre in Latvia in the early 1920s, thus promoting not only leftist ideas, but also those of the existing totalitarian USSR, so full of deception. As Anna Lācis writes in her own notes:

The work in Valmiera, much like at 'Skatuve,' was based on my findings in political theatre and was enriched by the excellent experience in the Soviet theatre. I consider my work to be the continuation and development of the political theatre tradition. Socialist realism takes many forms; it has promoted and still promotes emotional, mental and politically conscious education in various aspects. [...] Our theatre in Valmiera has accentuated the interest in political and ethical matters. This feature has been noticed by critics and the audience, who call us a journalistic theatre. That could be accepted. (242)

Anna Lācis's actively leftist attitude, which she had inherited from Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator and in which the theatre is an instrument in the improvement of social life, has long been rare in the context of Latvian art.

The trauma of socialist realism is one reason contemporary Latvian artists cite as justification for their lack of political activity. The fifty-year-long forced marriage of art and politics resulted in most artists expressing their political position against the existing government not by talking, but in the opposite manner: through silence. Works of art, such as landscape paintings, romantic poetry, or interpretations of classical productions, in which artists had managed to avoid the task of socialist education and not discuss the class struggle and the defeat of capitalism, became statements of legally lost, yet individually possible freedom. Dissident art, which could directly oppose the reigning power, did not exist in Latvia, since the majority of Latvian artists chose to speak an Aesopian language, hiding their true beliefs between the lines. As a result, art and especially theatre became a safe harbour for the practice of inner freedom—both the artist’s and the viewer’s—in the Latvian Soviet Republic, since any and all use of art for a public and loud demonstration of freedom ended in censorship, work restrictions, elimination, and subjection of the artists to compulsory downtime and poverty by banning them from publications, exhibitions, films, or theatre productions. The audience was well aware of the difference between politically and ideologically engaged works and those that avoided ideology; they granted the value of true art to the latter and embedded the axiom in their minds that true art separates itself from politics. Alvis Hermanis, currently the most recognized Latvian theatre director, compares the role of art in Latvia with the more politically active role of the theatre in Germany:

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In Latvia, we are closer to such a tradition where going to the theatre is more similar to going to church. Where people expect something to be done with their hearts. Our theatre audiences do not want [...] to end up at a parents’ meeting in a school when buying a ticket. But things are slowly changing even here. The new theatre curators and producers want to express themselves creatively, and, for them, the trend of social and political conceptualism is a simply wonderful opportunity. Poetry is replaced by journalism. (11)

The strategy of Aesopian language can no longer exist, since in a setting of theoretical freedom of speech, it is not necessary to hide one’s thoughts. New methods must be found, or long-forgotten ones recalled, to create a politically active artistic solution. That is where the experience of “grandmother” Anna Lācis, which had been developed in cooperation with Max Reinhardt, Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator and Vsevolod Meyerhold, can be helpful.

## SECOND LETTER: AGITPROP AS A DISCOURSE STYLE

-1-

Вторая бабушка.

Во первых, от всего сердца поздравляю тебя с юбилеем! Пусть он будет веселым и светлым. Жаль, что я не могу в нем участвовать. Но, надеюсь, что ты мне все подробно опишешь в письме, ладно?

У меня больших новостей нет. Работают над своим отрывком. Буду показывать его 28 октября. Смотрела много интересных кинофильмов, инсталок и спектаклей. Видела французов, группу Магнэ Робинсон. Это было интересно. Она большая художка. Все интересно для меня бы Сатурн. За закрытыми дверями.

Почему ты пишешь, что я ничего не даю, провоню. Ура! в беседе мы богатые? Почему ты уснедена, что, если не видишь, что я даю, а не даю ничего. Когда я много времени проводила в библиотеке, много занималась. Не знаю, что наиболее было бы это дело в Мурмане, хотя бы потому, что даю на бинам. Кани материал для реценсировать работе, для того надо просмотреть огромное количество книг поед. и от куда ты знала, что я не занимаюсь немецким языком? Если я в Гит? В том-то и дело, что там не было в Мурмане занимаюсь немецким и ничего не было. Почему ты думаешь, что в том-то и дело, что было? По моему, человек должен заниматься как, даже в 1 классе, куда мне в старшем возрасте. Это всегда дает огромные результаты. Я никак не могу понять, от куда ты знала такое категоричное мнение, что я логически мыслящая, кто мои, римские друзья, конечно, от этих вопросов далеки. Но римские друзья могут мне помочь лучше, чем любой



The second letter from Māra Ķimele featured in the film and discussed in this article was written on 16 October 1966. At the time she wrote this letter, Māra was a student in the directing faculty at the State Institute for Theatre Arts (GITIS) in the capital of the Soviet Union, Moscow. According to Māra's recollections of the faculty, its founder and first dean was Anna Lācis's husband Bernhard Reich, who lost the title due to repression in 1938; nobody knows of his contributions, and there is no memorial plaque for him (Zole 71).

The three-page tightly handwritten letter is in Russian, which was one of the languages Anna Lācis used to communicate with those close to her. It starts with wishes for Lācis's birthday and regret that she could not participate in the celebration. It is followed by a short paragraph in which Māra describes her studies and productions she has seen, and then a very passionate defensive monologue opposing her grandmother's accusations of laziness, inactivity, and willingness to leave directing studies. The letter characterizes Anna Lācis as very strict and intolerant, as her communication with her granddaughter is arrogant:

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Dear Grandmother! [...] Why do you write that I do nothing and spend my time on amusement and foolishness? Why are you so convinced that if you don't see what I do, it means I do nothing? In the summertime, I spent plenty of time in the library, I worked hard, and I don't think it would have been better to do that in Murjāņi. If nothing else, it was because I needed to find materials for the directing work and therefore needed to go through a large number of books and plays.

And why do you think that if I'm in Rīga I'm not studying German? Last year, we also decided to study German, but nothing came out of it. Why do you think we would have succeeded this year? I believe a person must study on their own starting from the first grade, not to mention those who are older.

I cannot possibly understand where this strict verdict comes from that I am careless and that my friends from Rīga do not care about such matters. My friends in Rīga are able to help me better even just for the simple reason that they are my friends. They are just like me, and they do not look at me arrogantly just because they know something better than I do. Many are actually smarter than I am, they know foreign languages, even German, they know literature, history, music, art—each one of them their own thing. Please do not get offended, but it is very difficult to study with you. Even just because there is always a distance and there isn't a single moment I forget my place and how tiny and silly I am in comparison to you. It bothers me a lot, I get frustrated and feel humiliated, even though I know you probably do not wish to humiliate me on purpose. There, you even write a letter as if you were writing it to a newspaper, not to me, you write very correct things, but you do not write about me, you do not reply to what I have written [...]

You are infuriated by the fact I want to surrender without a reason and you say that Reich decided to quit directing, but then he staged a wonderful production. Firstly, how can I even compare myself to Reich? And even if he left directing, what can I say then? [...]

It is, of course, a great advantage that you could be ambitious and couldn't afford such weaknesses in your own life. You gained a lot—doubt drains power and the ability to work, and one loses the most important thing—time. But it cannot be done on command—don't doubt! Moreover, you have misunderstood me. It is not a surrender but completely objective and grounded thoughts—is it worth it or not. There is no proof yet of

the things I can do and those I can't. That is why I am still in Moscow and at the institute. Do you really think I am so deceitful that I would still go on with my studies after giving up, knowing that I am not able? Alright, I will not frighten you further with my mood. It is a weakness that leads only to disagreement. I know that I must be strong, have faith and work, they say that on the radio and write it in the newspapers every day. I try to do that. That's all. Māra. 16 October 1966 (Ķimele, Second letter, 1966)

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This letter undoubtedly reveals the clash of opinions and emotions of two very strong people. In order to comprehend it better, it is necessary to know the context of the history of their personal relationship. Murjāņi, the place mentioned in the letter, is a small village approximately 50 km from Rīga, where Anna Lācis was assigned a small plot of land after rehabilitation, and Māra Ķimele's father, Vilis Ķimelis, had built a summer house with his own two hands, which evoked dramatic and sad memories for the family. Anna Lācis was never kind or sweet to her relatives; she treated Māra more like a servant. Māra went to the summer house to cook and clean, and she spent most of her time in the kitchen with Bernhard Reich heating the stove. In one scene in the film, Māra remembers how her grandmother had liked to sleep in, and Bernhard Reich went to the forest in the mornings to gather wild strawberries for his wife and brought them to her bed. For the most part, mostly Brecht's friend with whom he had developed the ideas of epic theatre spent his time sitting on a firewood log in the kitchen, which is where he wrote his notes on theatre. Although Asja's family, and especially Māra, experienced very tough circumstances, Asja did not leave this house in Murjāņi to her granddaughter. Even at the time this letter was written, Māra lived in a small student dormitory room in Moscow along with three other students, although her grandmother owned an empty one-bedroom apartment in Moscow (Zole 39).

Another thing that must be taken into consideration while reading this letter is the principal incompatibility of the worldviews of Māra's friends and Anna Lācis. Māra Ķimele belonged to a small yet very colourful group of youngsters untouched by censorship, known as the Kazisti, after the café where they gathered. They were creators of alternative culture, and many prominent Latvian artists and cultural figures stemmed from their group. They did not oppose the Soviet authority politically; however, their lifestyle was extremely different from the form and content officially accepted by the Soviet authority:

if it was socially accepted to sit on a chair, they had to sit on the floor, if others wore shoes, they would go barefoot, etc., so the early position was—if it's accepted to do it this way, we will do the opposite [...] Carnivals, slow sipping of coffee together, smoking in alleys with friends [...] it was not a united counter-culture organism, but more like weakly interconnected clusters of alternative culture. Some were united by gathering at "Kaza." For some, it was a fascination with French new wave or Italian neorealist cinema, going to Moscow or Tallinn to screenings of semi-banned or hard-to-get foreign films, jazz festivals, an appreciation of various modernist and avant-garde movements in Western art, the realization of poster language's significance, going to art exhibitions together. (Kursite 8)

Māra Ķimele also admits that they were not political protesters against the Soviet

order. What she allowed herself to do together with her friends was to act according to what she felt like doing, but even that was considered anti-Soviet:

“Kaza” became a sort of political organization—but only because we were out of control. No actual political activity took place there [...]. We just broadened our horizons in literature, music, and art, but this expansion was seen as anti-state activity. The fact that the system views each individual as a threat demonstrates not only the unworthiness of the system, but also that its downfall would happen soon—which is what happened, within our lifetime, even though we hadn’t predicted that the system would be so easy to defeat. We thought it was completely indestructible, but we challenged it anyway. (Ķimele, *Song for Two States* 99)

The chronological development of alternative culture in Riga is divided into three stages: the early 1960s, or the beatnik era; the mid-1960s to early 1970s, or the hippie era; and the first part of the 1970s, or the post-hippie era. The first period was characterized by a focus on modernist and avant-garde culture as alternative ways of existence. The second and third periods have been described as “doing nothing,” or negativism as a form of protest. Even though the chronology specifically mentions hippies, several other interest communities existed at the same time, whose points of interest were, for example, art photography, French and Western European culture of previous centuries, or pantomime and performance art. The unifying aspect of the various groups was the feeling of inner freedom, the term used by Māra Ķimele’s friends Eizēns Valpēters (“We felt inner freedom”) and Māra Zirnite (“Each of us was different, every individuality mattered instead of blending together”) (Kursīte 10). At the time, the realization of the occupation of Latvia was left unsaid, yet always present.

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In her 1966 letter to Asja, Māra Ķimele’s sharp revolt against her grandmother’s attitude and ways of thinking and expressing her thoughts are evident. She is offended by the official tone, as if Anna Lācis were writing for a newspaper. Seemingly correct things, the same as could be heard on the radio each day—that you must be strong, you must fight—most probably sounded like slogans, which are typical of revolutionary political theatre propaganda. Anna Lācis had, of course, known this means of expression since the 1920s when she created the “theatre of the persecuted” in Latvia. One can only imagine what the long-haired, freedom-loving girl in a miniskirt, as Māra Ķimele appears in photographs from the time, felt when she received a letter that was formed as propaganda material according to the criteria of proper agitprop:

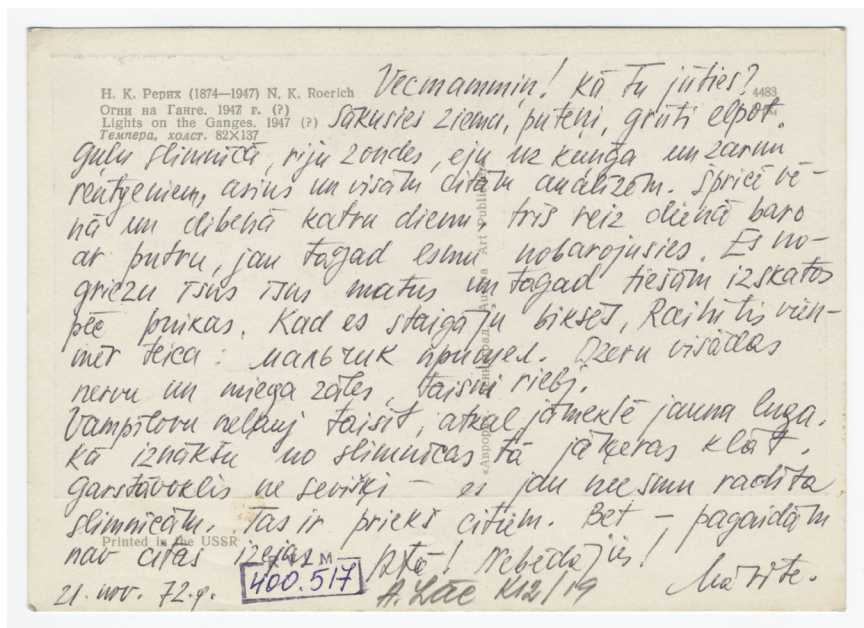
1. it points out the essentials in a sharp, poster-like, grotesque and energetic manner, painting a simple and graphic picture;
2. it is conditional, since it helps focus one’s attention on the essential content;
3. the topic is backed up by vastly elaborated, persuasive material;
4. a person’s actions and ideas are revealed in relation to historical events, which lets events gain a large scale. (Lācis 234)

It is significant that Anna Lācis mentioned Bernard Reich’s decision to leave directing as her argument in the letter, as well as the fact that he had staged a successful pro-

duction even after this decision. It is possible that the production implied is Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, which Reich helped Yury Lubimov stage in Moscow in 1964 and which became a pivotal point in the history of Russian theatre with the establishment of the new Taganka Theatre; however, yet again, it is not mentioned officially. There is no doubt that Reich influenced Māra Ķimele's career choice, her interest in Brecht and theatre that does not need to break anything but does need to stir up muddy water and oppose narrow-mindedness. He was well educated in philosophy, and opposed the descent of literature and art onto a narrow consumer level. He disliked that art provides for good stool, which is what it becomes in a well-off society (Zole 42). Reich's love of, devotion to, and sacrifice for Anna Lācis are as important to Māra as his professional advice on theatre. In a way, he became a sort of symbol of perfect love and, as Māra admits in the film, he created a misguided notion of what a loving relationship was.

80 It was Reich, and not Asja, who became the first judge of Māra's first productions; his joy at Māra's talent gave her energy. The first play Māra Ķimele staged was Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1968). Both the minimalist scenography by Andris Freibergs and the psychological realist directing infuriated the provincial theatre in Liepāja, so that its head promised to never again let this creative team into his theatre. Paradoxically, Māra Ķimele became a revolutionary artist like her grandmother, even though instead of a loud form, social role, propaganda, and ideology, she chose a nuanced, extremely delicate, and precise revealing of a person's spiritual life as her artistic way. Unlike her grandmother, Māra has never made "any work for the authorities and system" (Zole 143).

### THIRD LETTER: ON CENSORSHIP AND ANNA LĀCIS'S CONTEMPORARY GRANDCHILDREN



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The third letter included in the film was written in 1972. At the time, Māra had already been working at the Valmiera Drama Theatre for several years, the same theatre at which her grandmother was the main director in the 1950s. The Khrushchev Thaw, during which Stalin's repression and totalitarianism was judged, had ended, and, with it, the liberation of society leaving an open space for censorship in culture, which is proven by this short letter from a hospital, written on a postcard:

Grandmother! How are you? Winter has begun, there are blizzards, and it's hard to breathe. I'm in the hospital, I have to swallow probes, I'm having stomach and colon X-rays, blood and all sorts of analyses. They give me shots in the vein and the bottom every day, three times a day they feed me porridge, since I'm plump now. I cut my hair short and now I look like a boy. When I wore pants, dear Reich would always say: the boy is here. I drink all sorts of nerve and sleep medicine, I'm so tired of it.

They aren't allowing me to stage Vampilov, so I have to find a new play again. I will get to that once I leave the hospital.

I'm not in a very good mood—I'm not cut out for hospitals after all. That is for others. But, for now, there is no other way. Bye! Don't be sad! Mārite 21. Nov. 72. (Kīmele, third letter, 1972)

They were not allowing her to stage Vampilov. In the era of the LSSR, each of the plays selected by a theatre had to be approved by the Ideology Department of the Ministry of Culture. Art was seemingly divided into two parts: the ideological and the non-

ideological. The first kind included fine arts, literature, cinema, and theatre, and it was subjected to censorship, whereas design, architecture and applied arts were not. This often led to paradoxes; for example, an abstract composition was welcome on a tapestry but banned when painted on a canvas (Borgs 68).

According to Māra Ķimele, Alexander Vampilov was a semi-banned author in the early 1970s, and staging his works attracted extra attention, as they were often prohibited from being staged in the USSR. In Latvian dramaturgy, only one play was ever banned: the socially critical play *The Smell of Mushrooms*, written in 1968 by Gunārs Priede. Punitive measures were taken both against Priede and the artists who dared to commence production of the work. Staging Gunārs Priede's works was prohibited for several years, and two people were fired from their positions. However, such incidents did not occur often in the context of Latvian art, since, already at that time, doing politics was considered bad taste, and a disassociation in aesthetics was occurring (Borgs 87).

- 82** This disassociation in aesthetics is typical of contemporary Latvia as well. The majority of Latvian artists and society in general hold the right-wing “art for art’s sake” opinion, which is oriented towards matters of the form of the work of art instead of its content, and, in relations with society, the artists’ individual freedom to think for themselves is stressed. The fact that, in Latvian visual arts, reflection on ideas essential to society as a whole (and, in that aspect, this way of thinking can be defined as leftist) is not often observed, was written about as early as the 1970s by the painter and art historian Ojārs Ābols, who pointed out that “there is plenty of purely human pain in our painted panorama, there is an abundance of nostalgia. There is a generous amount of mastery, energy, power, vitality. The declarative topic is not being offered anymore, and a truly felt joy in painting mastery is king. A joy for nature, oneself, one’s abilities. And no doubt or questions to the world” (Ābols 71).

The fact that nothing much has changed over the course of thirty years is also proven by the work of up-and-coming Latvian artists. For example, among the 272 diploma works submitted for the Master’s degree qualification at the Art Academy of Latvia in the years 2011-14, only 33 were dedicated to socially relevant topics. None of the emerging artists reflected on a specific historical or socially significant event; no testimonies of ancient, recent, or contemporary history or political documents were used as the basis of content for the pieces. Young artists were mostly interested in matters of various art forms and means of expression, tracing personal experiences, the unraveling of the self, and the aspect of space. Time and socially significant events were left beyond the scope of their interests. Those who formally drew attention to the development of society-related topics chose to think, for example, of bullfighting as an entertainment industry, hunting as a culture and entertainment event for elite society, foot and back malformations, drinking fountains in public spaces, bridges, promenades, and cyclist tracks. However, there were also young artists whose pieces tackled issues of a person’s responsibility for the consequences of his/her ideology, unification as submission to consumerist ideology, the education system as a syn-

thesis of learning and living, integration policies and the improvement of the quality of society by promoting social values (*Master of Humanitarian Science in the Arts Diploma Works* 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014).

Theatre critic Silvija Radzobe discusses a similar situation in the theatre, stating that the commonly recognized overall distancing from social life, which is not news to the Latvian theatre, has several causes. Hypothetically, this phenomenon could have deeper roots based on historical traumas. First is fear and disgust of the idea of being trapped as a slave under the authority of some ideology such as, on one hand, the Soviet regime and its violently applied policy of ideologization towards art, and on the other, the postmodernist philosophy of absolute freedom and the relativity of reality. Second, perhaps, is a lack of literal technical skills since Latvia does not have a developed tradition of political and documentary theatre, although it must be noted that a new generation of directors in non-governmental theatres have been attempting to develop such a tradition. However, the reasons must be less noble in reality. It could be a fallacious myth that the Latvian viewer does not wish to see real life in the theatre, or it could be the artists' rather limited knowledge of and interest in social and political processes.

If we assume that social existence nowadays is based on the action of recording, which serves as the creator of historical memory and identity between two live creatures, and that works of art are exactly these documents or records (Ferraris), it can only be concluded that the Latvian artist mostly records the existence of modern society of which she is a part as deeply individual, egocentric, and oriented towards its own realm of feelings/comfort, and only starts showing interest in the outside world if it becomes bothersome and restrictive. Unfortunately, this interest more often involves documentarily recording than critically analyzing.

Against this overall politically inactive backdrop, it is fascinating to watch artists who could theoretically be called the ideological grandchildren of Anna Lācis, who are not only “those left-wing scoundrels” who do not only wish to challenge society with their work by kicking people out of their comfort zone, but are also able to stand as emotionally rational mediators between authority, society, and individuals. They are the ones who are not afraid to be political animals, creatures who are aware of their political dimension and the fact that we are always in a political situation that requires us to make moral decisions.

The most politically active theatre artists in Latvian theatre are Jānis Balodis and Valters Silis, who often work in tandem. Their jointly and separately created productions *Mārupīte*, *All My Presidents*, *10 Years for “Operation Iraqi Freedom,”* *Lost Antarctica*, and *Success Story* challenge with documentary material or a situation which, confronting the audience, creates preconditions for the creation of a new, more humane reality. Their productions cover almost all functions of documentary theatre as defined by Carol Martin: they review historical events, reconstruct them, blend autobiographies with history and the social and political settings, and critically revise both documentary and artistic activities. Their aim is to provide the audience

with the opportunity to see their own part in the ‘resistance’ movement in order to reduce the perceived stupidity and thoughtlessness of society.

It is interesting to search for similarities and differences in the work of the Jānis Balodis and Valters Silis tandem and what Anna Lācis defined as her working method in the early 1920s alongside Linards Laicens and Leons Paegle while creating productions at the Rīga Workers Theatre. In her *Notebooks*, Anna Lācis states that a political theatre production

- clearly defines what is good and what is bad;
- is ideologically full of aggressive, politically harsh ultimate mission;
- analyzes the protagonists not only psychologically, but also politically;
- displays a social type instead of an individual;
- shows a bright, surprising, harsh depiction;
- has a relative stage setting and a relative acting style;
- uses documentary material extensively;
- demonstrates the relation between events, people’s actions and ideas, and historical circumstances.

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Jānis Balodis’s and Valters Silis’s productions *The National Development Plan* (Dirty Deal Teatro, 2013) and *The Success Story* (National Theatre, 2016) can be considered classic examples of political theatre that meet the criteria Anna Lācis outlines.

At the base of *The National Development Plan* lies a document of the same title that outlines the development path of Latvia and a scale of political values, to which, whether we like it or not, all our lives are subjected. This document holds a promise to provide happiness to all of Latvia’s inhabitants with the aid of economic growth. The show proves the opposite by offering a happiness formula that is not based on economic units, and does not require ecological or political violence toward the world in which we live. Silvija Radzobe has said of this production:

if there was no such show, someone should come up with it, because the opportunity to be in the same time and space as the artist, who looks upon the current aspects of our lives in a similar way to you, not only provides satisfaction but also diminishes social loneliness. And it proves that, in modern theatre art, the aesthetic function is not the only one that matters [...] In the finale, the performer asks several men and women to join him in the acting area. We hear quiet music, the couples embrace tightly, and they lightly sway to the rhythm of the music. A very good, even philosophically saturated finale. It is true because that is what a person can actually do—use their presence to comfort even a stranger, which the show has helped them to feel close to even if for one and a half hours.

*The Success Story* analyzes Latvia’s so-called success story emerging from the financial crisis of 2007. Even though the official statement of the International Monetary Fund and European Union described the Latvian government’s crisis solution model and the results thereof as a success story, the reality reveals the formation of vast social inequality, social stratification, and economic emigration of the country’s population. Jānis Balodis and Valters Silis, together with the actors, inspect and analyze the history of political decision-making and its reflection in mass media over a span



of almost ten years, questioning the motivation behind each decision. According to Līga Ulberte:

It seems like the father of twentieth-century political theatre Bertolt Brecht, who believed that a perfect theatre would educate and entertain at the same time and it would be preferable if the audience started discussing what they have seen as early as during the show and did it loudly, would like *The Success Story* very much. It is impossible not to intently think about it while watching; at the same time, it is often very fun, since *The Success Story* is not political propaganda or a lecture on economics, but the truest of all true forms of theatre—a perpetual game of masks/roles/transformation. Ironic and very ambiguous.

It is this very ambiguity that separates Anna Lācis's approach to developing political topics and that of her "grandchildren." Despite the clearly defined conflict and historical setting, the standpoint of the authors is civilly active and unmistakable. Neither contemporary author clearly states who is the "good" or "bad" character in a specific conflict. It is not indecision or cowardice that makes them act this way, but rather a conviction that the audience could be encouraged to take civil action by an active process of thinking in which one must make one's own decision according to one's own code of ethics. *The Success Story* ends with an invitation to battle and activity, but it does not give a direction or a side of the frontline at which the viewer must stand. Jānis Balodis and Valters Silis do not look to subdue the audiences of their shows with education and, for this reason, do not humiliate them, but instead choose to sympathize and thus to help. In a way, they represent a contemporary leftist worldview that is different from classical right and left opinions, since "the doctrinally right state that politics have no place in art, but the doctrinally left insist that art has no place in politics" (Strauss).

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This section of the article began with a letter referring to a case of political censorship in the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic theatre. It is significant that the authors of *The National Development Plan* and *The Success Story* demonstrate in their productions that censorship exists nowadays in Latvia; it is not outright ideological, yet powerful nonetheless. At the moment, artistic choices are determined mainly by monetary censorship, which the artists support themselves with their self-censorship. When society demands entertainment and decorative functions for works of art, and the artist's quality of life depends on meeting such demands, politically active art is hard to maintain.

Even though political art has not yet been forbidden by the police, reactionary and totalitarian political forces have sought to dictate right and wrong answers in art and education. The near presence of totalitarian Russia, where political art and freedom as such have no place anymore and are oppressed and annihilated, is one of the reasons why the activation of Anna Lācis's experience for Latvian democracy is important. Another reason is the influence of the neoliberal free market on people's wellbeing and equality. If Latvian artists, just as Anna Lācis did nearly a hundred years ago, could understand themselves to be citizens of this world who care about social justice, and if they would invite society to fight for this justice with

their actions, it might be much easier for us to create a more humane and prosperous country.

#### FOURTH LETTER: CONCLUSION

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Sveicinājamie! Kā Tu jūties un  
 kāds tev garastāvoklis? Sveicini Raičiti!  
 Zināsi, rīdīs droz būs mājas. Mācē, visas  
 lapaš jau būs apkrītas un man aiz  
 loģa bērzi pa retām bārdina lejā pēdē -  
 jās zelta mānīnas. Klauvis viraldē -  
 tas nomirina sakarāto garu un mītu -  
 šoģiņajumi rīt normāli, bet kas fur 12 -  
 tāns grūti parādēt. Aktīri tomēr miz -  
 jūt Gogola bēlo smalkumu. Vīdīm vīri  
 hikas skaidrs un no tā situācijas klēst  
 clauds priņķītošas nekā to prasa mate -  
 riāls. Bīroairāks man bailis ~~no~~ ~~tas~~, ka  
 parādīs bīroairāks. Tas bīroairāks, bez kara,  
 manu prāt, nēdēst mēdēt nēdēst arto,  
 par māklas arto nēdēst nēdēst arto. Esmu  
 māz lēt pagurvi un laikam arī pati dēda  
 vīdīm māzāk kā spēj.  
 Sveicinājamie, mēfuri sēri labo omi  
 un protams atrācēti. Lētā paldeis  
 par vīdēstēti - Rīte man to nēdēva -  
 Ar, tev gan vajadzētu atrācēti uz  
 Valmieru!  
 Atā, atā! Raičiti.  
 25. X To. g. Valmieru.

Today is the 18th of October. The wind toys with yellow leaves on the other side of the library windows of the Art Academy of Latvia. A faded piece of paper is open on the computer screen with Māra's letter that she wrote on 25 October 1970. It was 46 years and 7 days ago:

Dear Grandmother! How are you and how is your mood? Say hello to dear Reich! See, all the leaves have almost fallen from the trees, and the birches behind my window spill golden coins from time to time. I'm listening to Vivaldi—it soothes the heated soul and flesh. Rehearsals are going well, but what will be in the end—it's hard to predict. [...] I'm most concerned about losing the miracle. That miracle without which no act can happen, let alone an act of art. I am a little weary and perhaps I myself give them less than I'm able to. Grandmother, keep up your spirits and, of course, write. Bye! Bye! Mārīte. (Ķimele, fourth letter, 1970)

In the film *Māra*, the letters quoted in this article are sung in the manner of orthodox chants or prayers, for several reasons. First, the film followed the rehearsal process of Māra Ķimele's staging of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, which strongly accentuated the religious motif. Second, the film indirectly testified to its protagonists' faith that a work of art holds the ability to shape and transform reality, whether socially political or deeply personal. Third, these letters were prayers of a sort for love and support. Whether or not they were granted, we do not know, for the answers have been lost in time.

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## SUMMARY

Using the private correspondence between two Latvian theatre directors, Māra Ķimele and her grandmother Anna Lācis, this article traces the history of political theatre in Latvia. Anna Lācis was one of the pioneers and greatest representatives of this type of theatre during the time of Latvian independence in the 1920s and later during the Soviet occupation. The relationships of these directors of different generations with power reveal the survival strategies of the artist in totalitarian states. The cases of Ķimele and Lācis show two completely different strategies and choices made in regard to artistic practice and way of life. Even though political and socially proactive theatre is relatively underrepresented in Latvia today, Anna Lācis still has followers who, perhaps unknowingly, use and develop the principles of political theatre she defined in order to critique and analyze the current situation. This is extremely important when democracy is threatened not only by the return of totalitarian ideas, but also by social inequality as perpetuated by neoliberalism.

## NOTE

\* All images are courtesy of Krista Burāne.

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