

# Specifically Latvian Vol. 6



ROTKHO, director Lukasz Twarkowski

## 2021/22 LATVIAN THEATRE SEASON OVERVIEW

Zane Kreicberga, theatre director and researcher

Recent years in Latvian theatre have been turbulent in several senses. After adapting to different restrictions for public events during the *Covid 19* pandemic, theatres were allowed to return to the usual situation, but the audience had become cautious and unpredictable. The expansion of the accumulated repertoire of theatres did not meet the expected enthusiasm of the audience and that raised questions about the changed audience's habits, the future of live events and the financial survival of theatre institutions substantially dependent on their own income. On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine and the war became our reality. Among many other manifestations, in March also Latvian theatre people organized a meeting in front of the Russian Embassy in Riga protesting against the war. There were theatre workers in Latvia that did not support this meeting. Immediately it became a question of real deeds – not only how much we personally invest as volunteers and donate for Ukraine, but also if there is a place for Ukrainian refugee artists and Ukrainian culture in the Latvian context. Why do we know so little about the Ukrainian theatre? Is there a place for art and theatre at all during wartime, and what would be its mission? I guess that many theatre makers were confronted with these questions, even if not always explicitly. Nevertheless, life goes on in the shadow of the war, which has revealed the splits in our society. Next, I will try to introduce some of the latest processes and phenomena in Latvian theatre, which might be of interest for foreign audiences.

The last year is remarkable with a strong presence of international collaborations in Latvian theatre. The Dailes Theatre (DT), our largest repertoire theatre, in collaboration with the Polish JK Opole Theatre and the artistic team led by director Lukasz Twarkowski has produced a multimedia spectacle *Rotkho* on the big stage. Critics praise it as “a new type of experience” and “a total audiovisual explosion” with excellent acting. The next surprise at the DT was the presence of the world famous actor John Malkovich together with Ingeborga Dapkūnaitē in Bernard-Marie Koltès's play *The Solitude of Cotton Fields* staged by internationally well-known Russian director Timofey Kulyabin. Both productions have been nominated as the best large-scale performances for the National Theatre Award. The internationalization is the strategic choice of the DT under the artistic leadership of director Viesturs Kairiņš regularly inviting foreign directors and organizing the Dailes Theatre Festival in spring, which offers the best performances of the season with English subtitles.

One of the leading small-scale public theatres *Dirty Deal Teatro* (DDT), in collaboration with Kaunas National Drama Theatre, has produced “a drama lesson for Artificial Intelligence” *Frankenstein Complex*, in English with the cast of Latvian and Lithuanian actors directed by Valters Silis. The dramaturgy of the performance consists of the playwright's Kārlis Krūmiņš dialog with the AI text generating programme and scenes that the AI has written itself questioning the future of human creativity. In spring, the DDT also organized a mini-festival *Estonian and Latvian Drama* presenting two productions made by mixed teams in Tallinn theatre centre *Vaba Lava – Two Garages* directed by Elmārs Seņkovs and *I Had a Cousin* written by Rasa Bugavičiūtė-Pēce and directed by Valters Silis – and readings of new Estonian plays. Another leading small-scale public theatre *Ģertrūdes ielas teātris* (GIT) is part of an ongoing project *Baltic Current: a think tank for sustainable performing arts in the Baltics* together with the Kaunas

City Chamber Theatre, the performing arts platform *Sōltumatu Tantsu Lava* in Tallinn and the Goethe Institute. It is a series of workshops for young artists to nurture their artistic practice and understanding of the current performing arts environment in the Baltics. The GIT is also hosting the residencies for the Baltic and Nordic artists. It is not possible to mention all relevant activities in this short article, however, it seems obvious that the cooperation of the Baltic artists and performing art organisations is gaining momentum and is necessary and productive for all three performing art scenes. The New Theatre Institute of Latvia is leading the cooperation project *Baltic Take Over* with the Lithuanian Dance Information Centre in Vilnius and the *Kanuti Gildi Saal* in Tallinn that will result in a festival featuring Baltic performing artists in Helsinki in June 2023 in collaboration with four Finnish performing arts organisations. Finally, yet importantly, the Baltic Drama Forum sequentially organized in each of the Baltic countries next year during the first week of November will move to Riga and will feature the Latvian showcase. Save the dates!

The international activities, mainly concerned with Russian speaking countries, are the focus of the organization *KatIZ* run by Russian theatre producer Evgeniya Shermeneva, the former producer of the International Theatre Festival NET (New European Theatre) in Russia, who moved from Moscow to Riga several years ago. Mikhail Durnenkov's play *TWHYS* (The War Has not Yet Started) was one of the first productions in 2018 directed by Lera Surkova with a multinational cast – Latvian actress Guna Zariņa, Lithuanian actor Gytis Ivanauskas and Russian actor Alexander Malikov. The performance is still in the repertoire. Shermeneva regularly produces the live and online readings of Belorussian, Russian and Ukrainian contemporary plays involving actors from different theatres.

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## ROTHKO AS ROTKHO. LUKASZ TWARKOWSKI ON THE PROVENANCE OF ART

Poland's leading contemporary director Lukasz Twarkowski has staged one of the most impressive theatre shows in Dailes Theatre in Riga this year dedicated to one of the world's most expensive artworks – Mark Rothko's painting. Straddling the border between theatre, film, and video art, *ROTKHO* (a distortion of the famous Latvian born artist's surname) dives deep into the abyss of contemporary art, questioning the relationship between the fake and the original in the eve of the era of digitalization. Nominated in six categories, including Big Form Performance of the Year and Director of the Year for Latvian Theatre Award *Spēlmaņu nakts 2022*, the show is awaiting a wide touring programme in the year to come.

### How did the *Rotkho* project start? And why was it important to stage it in Latvia?

This project has its origin in many different places and times. It's true that I would probably not think about doing a performance, partially based on Mark Rothko's story, if I didn't have the proposal to work in the Dailes Theatre in Latvia. At the same time, it was a topic I've been interested in for a long time. I have appreciated Rothko paintings since I was a teenager, taking my first trips to London and New York. A few years ago, there was a huge retrospective exhibition in the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* in Vienna. And it was very strange, with all these historic interiors, full of decorations... For me, it was impossible to appreciate Rothko and his art in this environment. And I felt that it was kind of a failed idea... There were long queues to get there, and, in fact, I left with huge disappointment seeing the bourgeois Viennese audience so happy after having the opportunity to see these paintings. It was one part of the inspiration. At the same time, I would also search for the origins of this project in China. I had a chance to take many trips to China with Krystian Lupa working on video works for him. During these travels I was offered the book *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese* by Byung-Chul Han which pretty much saved my life in Asia and China and became like the basis of the *Rotkho* project from the very beginning. It tells about the idea of originality which is so important in Western culture, and offers different perspectives about the relation between the original, fake and the copy. There were many ideas I found extremely interesting in Byung-Chul Han's writings.

When I proposed the topic of Rothko to artistic director Viesturs Kairiņš and director Juris Žagars from Dailes Theatre, they accepted it quite enthusiastically. I had in my mind that it would not be a kind of biography about Mark Rothko, but rather a philosophical performance around probably one of the most important questions of modern art. And when we had related these two topics – the Rothko story and Byung-Chul Han, we were trying to dig a little bit deeper through aspects of Asian culture, trying to see Western culture and its art market from that perspective. To put it under the microscope and try to re-examine... and to look at it through Byung-Chul Han's interpretation. This was one of the most important things for me – how differently the idea of a copy and an original is understood in both cultures. And this is what I really experienced in China as well. And just after, when we had related these topics that were somehow going through China, New York and Latvia, after having created this triangle between the three countries, I discovered the movie *Made You Look: A True Story of Fake Art* (2020) which is telling the story about one of the fake paintings of Mark Rothko. It fit so perfectly with the idea that we had had from the beginning, and we started to use it.

Every time when we dig for the topics, we try to work on the edge between fiction and documentary research, and then we develop them into more fictional kinds of stories. It was pretty important to do it in Latvia because otherwise I wouldn't have decided to do it about Mark Rothko. At least not now. Over the last few years it has become kind of... not really a method – I don't think it is good to have a method, but it's true that our research is quite often concentrated or started from the place where we are digging for this topic. It also forges a connection to the place and the people with whom we work. Already with casting, it was good to talk with the actors about



Juris Bartkevičs as Rothko in *ROTKHO*, director Lukasz Twarkowski

Rothko, about his paintings and the prices of his paintings etc. It's good to start with something that has some connection with the soil we work on.

### What is the main thing you wanted to share through this performance? Was it the unsolvable relationship between original and copy? The myth about authenticity? The domination of capitalism over spiritualism? To find the core of the meaning of art? To explore the aesthetics of Rothko?

I would answer "yes" to all these questions. We are interested in all of these topics and many more. I believe somehow that theatre is the kind of art that has the possibility of finding a way of communication completely beyond language. And this is the case also for this performance. Of course, we had thousands of questions on which we were working on and which are present in the show. Somehow this dramaturgy starts from the past, from the position of this renowned artist in sixties, it goes through nowadays and then draws the storyline which goes into the future because this is what we are living now – the question of NFT (non-fungible token, ed.), and question of materiality and value in general. And of course, the question of transgression and transcendence – the need of transcendence and emotion. It's all in it. I don't want to set limits. I think that in most of our shows we are building very complex realities that can be shared as a kind of collective experience. As I always say, if you can share ideas with words then it makes no sense to make a performance about it. It takes a lot of effort to do the show, like months of work... If you can share some ideas in words, then it's enough. I believe that theatre is one of the most complex arts that has the possibility of communicating on many different levels, not only on an intellectual one. It is one of the most sensual arts in which we are receiving something, sharing time with others through all of our senses. That's how it is stronger than the cinematic language which we are also using in this show. But the synergy of live performance with cinema gives a much stronger effect that you cannot achieve either in cinema or theatre on their own.

### How do you see the place of the theatre in this art market capitalization and also digitalization?

The theatre is an ever-changing organism which reacts quite quickly to reality. So, of course the challenges nowadays are enormous on all levels, not only the war that is going on, but also regarding climate change, the catastrophe that is approaching, and how we can take responsibility for it. At the same time, while making the theatre productions there are so many positions we have to take on. But in the times of digitalization... I believe that theatre is an organism that has been devouring all the technologies ever since... forever. It is like a mutant which is changing, taking something from life, trying to find the answers to this reality we are going through. And

I believe that it will always find its way to share, even if it takes a completely different form. No matter, if it is an immersive performance or video performance, or made only via an internet connection. But, this is the question as well that everybody has to answer – when does theatre start? I remember Tadeusz Kantor had this beautiful sentence that the theatre starts when in front of one human being stood another human being, but divided by an impassable border. I believe that also in the digital era this kind of meeting will still be needed, and we will be more and more seeking very simple human contact. I cannot predict the forms, but I believe that it will always find its way of communicating, and it will keep on changing permanently.

And what concerns the part of the capitalization of the art market – it is always a question when working in theatres and big institutions in different countries. In the case of Rothko, we were asking ourselves – how can we criticize art market and capitalism while doing the show in one of the biggest and richest theatre institutions of Latvia. But I don't think that we shouldn't do it. I think we have to ask all kinds of questions, no matter where we are. It is still a very special community. I believe that theatre doesn't really fall under the market rules, it is still pretty much connected to the whole theatre system in our part of the world. And the theatre should be open for experimentation and research. I think that one of the most important challenges for artistic theatre is taking a voice regarding problematic topics, giving them a possibility to be researched and serving as a laboratory for finding a new language of communication.

### There is this scene in your performance where Juris Bartkevičs as Rothko says "they do not even know where Daugavpils is!" – as it was absolutely necessary to know one's background to understand one's art.

This sentence is something Rothko himself probably has never said, but for me it is more like a scream of despair from him in this difficult moment when you are being fooled, and you understand that your plan went wrong and you have to take back your paintings. But if you are asking about the background – I don't think that it is absolutely always needed, but this is how I learned to read art. Somehow all the artists with whose biographies we work, their background is always a very important starting point to imagine their context and their topics. In the case of Rothko, I believe that his origins from Daugavpils were very important, as well as his Jewish origins. But I would say, as we consider him as an American artist – as he moved to the United States at the age of 10 and he was almost fully formed in the United States. But I believe that sometimes absence can be even more important. I believe that the memories from childhood and the feeling of being somehow a vagabond and being this never-ending traveller. I think that it is a kind of experience that forms us. And often even more strongly than very well-known and conscious origins. Personally, I could say that sometimes the lack and absence of the father is something that forms you much stronger than his presence would.

### Would you say there is something specifically Latvian about the Daile's actors you have worked with?

In this kind of a project, we are always searching for artists ready to go with us into some kind of a journey about which we have no idea what the end-result will be. In the beginning, we don't know what the script or even what the characters will be. It always needs a lot of trust. And I would say that in this production I met an incredible team of co-creators who are ready to chase a dream and stand together in this trip towards the unknown. And what I appreciated enormously in this work and what is not so common anymore, is the incredible respect for each other and for our profession we are working in. Like the question of taking a stake... we put the stake of this game, of this creation – how personally important it is for me and what I can give to the group. And here in Riga, in the Dailes Theatre I felt from the beginning that all the ensemble is fully in. I think that is one of the most beautiful things to have in this kind of environment – one that is full of respect, love and imagination. ■

#### Next *ROTKHO* shows:

1–3 Dec, Dailes Theatre, Riga, Latvia

10–11 Dec, Opole, Poland (Divine Comedy Festival)

Also showing in February and April in Riga, Latvia

25–28 May, Onassis Stegi, Athens, Greece

## VALTERS SĪLIS ON HOW TO BE SPECIAL

Valters Sīlis is one of the most active directors of the younger generation and has been the director of the National Theatre since 2012 and also has staged many shows at the *Dirty Deal Teatro*. Discovering socially controversial topics is not only the passion of Valters, but it is also the creative niche where he feels best. His performances provoke thinking and serve as signs on the road leading the public towards looking at the world not only through one's own ego. For more than ten years, Valters has been participating in international cooperation projects, and his performances have often been performed in the countries of the Baltic and Nordic regions, and have travelled to festivals throughout Europe. In January 2022, he staged a unique project called the *Frankenstein Complex*, based on playwright's Kārlis Krūmiņš dialog with actual Artificial Intelligence. The dramatic coproduction with National Kaunas drama theatre suggests how far one can go in striving for seeming perfection, while calling into question the playwright's challenge in the creative "duel" with Artificial Intelligence, which probably carries the quintessence of dramaturgy around the world.

### What was the beginning of your international experience as a theatre director?

I was still doing my Master's degree at the Latvian Academy of Culture, when the Theatre Academy of Helsinki was looking for a director from Latvia for one project. That's how I got the opportunity to work with the students of the Master's course of their Actors' Program. These were Swedish speaking actors from Finland, Norway and Sweden. The project was about modern classics, we staged plays from the end of the 20th century, and I chose Scottish author Gregory Burke's play *Gagrin Way* (2009). The work was properly done, and I met the actors there, and with one of them, Carl Alm, we became good friends. I had this idea in my mind that had tormented me for some time already [about the dilemma between individual and public freedom; the performance builds like a discussion between a Swede and a Latvian, arguing the positions of each country making claims for mistakes made by the other party and unsuccessfully looking for solutions]. Theatre GIT had called for applications, and they had already had international experience. So, I applied. We had one Latvian actor and one Swedish speaking Finn actor, and so the *Legionnaires* (2011) were born. Thus, from an international project in which I myself was involved; I became the initiator of another project. And then there has been a lot of everything.

### Why would they need a Latvian director?

It was a Nordic countries' project, and it was necessary to involve not only the representatives of the Scandinavian countries, which were the majority, but from Baltic countries as well... I am not sure what was written in their invitation, but our Academy teachers proposed it to me. And, this was a wonderful learning project, an opportunity for me to have the means for a full-scale show, to work in a complicated way, to work in another place, to make a lot of mistakes. (*Smiles.*) It was an opportunity to expand the circle in which I wanted to work, because in Latvia the theatre field is quite small. I had previously participated in some international projects, and master classes in Riga. It was a very special feeling to meet people who are coming here. And, I kind of wanted to use this profession as a possibility to meet people somewhere else. And, with the *Legionnaires*, it seemed like this idea might work elsewhere.

### You thought that this piece could be understood in other countries?

During the process itself, we even forgot about it. We thought it would not be understood elsewhere. That Carl's mother will not understand it. But, it turned out that it was quite strong and understandable, not too mainstream, though. Sometimes the biggest mistake is trying to please another culture or place, trying to do what is right there. But, there is no such right thing. It is important to be conscious of the character of your work, and you will meet those who would need it.

When we talk broadly about some issue, about Latvia in Europe or the collapse of the USSR, it is so non-specific and wide that we can easily get lost. But with the *Legionnaires* or the *Latvian National Development Plan* (2012), I could sense what might work. We have travelled



*The Frankenstein Complex*, director Valters Sīlis

to several countries even with *Lost Antarctica* (2015). This show could only attract a limited number of people in Latvia. But it turned out that it can attract the same limited number of people in other countries as well, and people noticed it. *The Success Story* (2016), an ironic take on contemporary Latvian history, went too much into local personalities – it worked well locally, but was too specific for the international audience. While with the *Being Nationalist* (2017) anyone could identify with it more easily, because there are such right wing politicians in every European country.

### Have Theatre Showcases been useful for you?

Definitely. The works that have been shown in the Latvian Showcase have also been shown abroad. Even *The River Mārupite* (2012), a musical excursion along a polluted local river, provoked interest to be invited, only it was too site specific. I also like to attend theatre showcases myself as a visitor to understand why something is seen as valuable. I think seeing the show is necessary. You don't always expect an active result, but it is a process. When Latvian Showcases stopped for some time, the *Latvian National Development Plan* was shown in Estonia, and it got an invitation to Helsinki. The *Lost Antarctica* was shown in Slovakia, and we got invited to Brussels. But, there is no better way than sharing the work in such a form.

### Do you have an audience in your mind when you are working on something?

I make it for myself, and then everything is okay. But when I start thinking about the viewer, that's where the problems start. This applies both to working in Latvia and abroad. If you are the only point of reference to yourself, then you will make a show that at least you will like. You attach yourself to a narrow part of your being, and maybe that will not interest a large part of society, but, as we are from one big collective, there is a possibility to hit the feelings of someone else. If it is important to me, it might be important to someone else too.

### Tell about the *Frankenstein Complex* (2022).

#### Why did you decide to make it as a co-production?

The process started from the idea of Kārlis Krūmiņš. He applied for the Beta version of the GPT-3 language model, an AI application that uses deep learning to produce human-like text. It was a much slower application process then, now anyone can use it. He showed us the first version of the generated text, and we understood that the language of the performance should be English. Because the application makes certain specific mistakes, a word sometimes sounds like another word, some incomprehensible meaning is formed. So, we decided we should stick with the original text – that the actors will say what is generated by the computer.

I was invited to work on *Miškinis* in Kaunas in 2015, and I had established a good relationship with several Lithuanian actors, and there was a desire to continue this relationship. And then this idea came, where it was possible. In the Baltic context, we mainly see theatre directors from each other's countries, but we don't see the actors. So, it seemed like a good idea to introduce Kaunas with two good Latvian actors, and to introduce Riga with two good Lithuanian actors. I gathered the group that I had worked with, except for Deividas Breivė – he is a new actor with whom I was working with for the first time, but I am very happy. Vaidas Maršalka, for example, is someone who cannot hide his thoughts from his face. Each actor has his own quality, something more than just technique. In the text of the play, one of my favourite lines is: "you don't need thoughts to carry on a dialogue". Many things in our speech are automatic,

but this was an opportunity to fill that automatic text with emotions, to connect emotionally with the text that is algorithmically generated, and to enrich the text with human features. It was our base. We didn't want to parody it; our goal was to be as sensitive and honest as possible to the text.

### How does it feel to work in English or in another foreign language?

In the *Frankenstein Complex* there was a good reason to use English. But there have been times when we use English and it is not the best choice. At least, during the process of making it. It is good to test the text in your own language. You can check it using rude words – say the same word in English and in Latvian, and you will immediately feel the cruelty in that word. Working in another language is definitely a thing where time teaches you to trust.

During the monologues, the actor must be in good contact with the audience. If not, it doesn't work. We've had a good experience both in *Legionnaires* and in *The Nationalist* when we made some parts in the local language. I think, if it is possible, it should be done. I have also observed in other people's work when they are working in a foreign language, sometimes when you close your ears, everything becomes more understandable. But sometimes extra actions break down or over-explain what the text is already doing. You must have reliable assistants who understand the language and who can point out the problems.

In *Legionnaires*, we both were speaking English, but we tried to play in Latvian as well as much we could. In Finland, we spoke Finnish. In Italy, we realized that English is not so good for the audience there, and Kārlis Krūmiņš learned the role in Italian. He spent a month learning it and people remember it as a very special thing. If people are ready to invest – not only the actors, but everyone else – these moments are rewarding.

### Is it important to you that the international audience hear the voices of our region?

For many years there has been this central idea – to be heard in the West. But even my neighbours don't hear me. At the same time, you might have some close person there. Like I went to the Estonian Theatre Festival *Draama*, and there were at least three shows I would like to be shown in Latvia, but I'm not sure if they are needed in the West. It is important to hear each other, to be interested and to look at the neighbours. To decentralize this thinking. Interest in the other is a two-way street. It is a willingness to give and to receive. If I want to show you something, but you are not interested, it's ok.

In Europe, many different cultures live in quite a small area, but it is very interesting how everyone copes with their history and their present. For me, it is important to do my job, to tell an interesting story, to find a unique story in people. In the difficult situation we are in today, there is still a small part we can do. And, from time to time, we also get some interest from outside. But interest is a mutual relationship that needs to be maintained. It depends on regularity and communication. Having regular showcases reminds you about the international viewer and how to communicate with them. On the one hand, yes, I only think about myself, but on the other hand, the communication with the audience is somewhere in the back of my head. The more people get involved in that context, the more advice, objections or misunderstandings you get, the more you start thinking why this story worked for me and not elsewhere. It is something processual. And every now and then these meetings and connections happen. They are most often unexpected, they cannot be planned in advance, but you can provide them with an occasion for it to happen. ■

## A CONTINUOUS WILL TO UNDERSTAND THE OTHER

At this year's International Festival of Contemporary Theatre *Homo Novus*, artist duo Jānis Balodis (Latvia) and Nahuel Cano (Argentina), presented their work *The Last Night of the Deer*. It tells a story about a December night when Nahuel was traveling to Riga. Jānis picked him up from a ferry in Klaipeda. And, as they were driving, a severe snow storm started. They decided to take a smaller road where they accidentally hit a deer. The performance inspired by Eduardo Kohn's anthropology book *How Forests Think* tells a story about all-too-human forests and the more-than-human spirits that inhabit them, continuing the interest which permeates the works of both artists about the coexistence of different societies, individuals, phenomena and species, trying to answer the question – how are we here together? And are we together at all?

### How was your show in Kuopio?

Jānis: I think it was good. It was a different space. But I think it went well together with the work. And also, leaving the city with the bus to travel to the location added to the experience of the performance in Kuopio.

Nahuel: The festival hired a bus and the audience was going like 15 minutes away from the city centre. This idea of traveling together added a lot. It was different from the performance in Riga.

### What is your background? How did you two meet, what connected you?

Nahuel: Well, we met in Amsterdam, in the DAS Theatre master's program in Amsterdam. We kind of clicked very quickly, because he had written to me: "Hey, can you help? I'm looking for an apartment." And, we became close since then. We find it strange. For me, it was a surprise that there were a lot of connections between Latvia and Argentina. It was a good way of meeting beyond the personnel level or becoming friends and enjoying being together. So, from there, I think we started to also find points in common in terms of work and how we think about theatre, and also differences and that is the fun part.

### Can you elaborate a little bit on these similarities and the connection points between Latvia and Argentina?

Jānis: I think, there are some, let's say, an unfortunate fate that has happened or that the people went through – one of these things being the government organized violence and oppression against the people of the country. Argentina had a time of dictatorship and Latvia had a time of occupation. And, it is quite a wide topic – to think about its impact. But also, another way, I think, for me somehow even more important, was the, let's say, the economical oppression from international organizations or the story of the practices of the International Monetary Fund. When we were working on the first work together at DAS, it was kind of an angry teenager's room with posters on the walls, that kind of room I didn't have at the time when I was a teenager. And there was one poster that looked like a poster rock bands create about their tour - a date and a city. But instead of a rock band being promoted, it was a poster for the International Monetary Fund, with a list of countries and the year the IMF "visited" the country. Argentina was in 2001, Latvia in 2010.

Nahuel: I think both countries are in a way peripheral, but also in the centre. Latvia is a peripheral country, but it is also part of Europe. Argentina is a South American country, it's not in the northern hemisphere, but at the same time, inside South America it is an important country. So, I think this is a strange position to be in, especially regarding the field of theatre, it is not the same situation being in Latvia as it is being in Amsterdam, or being in Germany or Belgium that has a lot of weight in terms of money, but also in terms of production of discourses or where, where the *real* theatre is made. We also found that out and we always had this fantasy of how great it would be to create connections between peripheral countries without going through Brussels or Amsterdam, or the Goethe Institute, for example, how it usually happens. And our work *The Last Night of the Deer* is a little bit like that. It was produced in Riga and Kuopio and was very much self-organized with Jānis in his studio and residency space.



*Last Night of the Deer* by Jānis Balodis & Nahuel Cano

### Can you tell a little bit more about the practical process of collaboration?

Jānis: I think we started last summer, like I was talking with Nahuel in spring, then we had a couple of sessions during the summer, but it was quite important to get into one room beforehand. The first big steps were during December, like last year, when we had that drive (that is also reflected in the show). Nahuel had this slow travel to Latvia, and we worked on the research – reading the essay, arriving at the concept or the storyline. And then we decided that we needed another meeting before we started to work on the premiere, so it was good we had a chance to work in a residency in Cassis for two weeks.

Nahuel: Yes, we were there for almost 10 days in Cassis in France. And, in between, we had more *Zoom* meetings, emails. In December it was more reading and then we started to write, in Cassis it was very much writing, and basically, then we had the structure. We were working at some moments in parallel, Jānis was writing, I was in the studio, working on the music that was coming together. And then in July, one year after the start, we met in Riga and we had a fun and intense regime of rehearsing almost every day. It was very good that we had the space, that we could rehearse in the location, so we could create it together with the space. And also, we had five days in Kuopio to finish the writing part. Jānis has more practice and skills in writing. But I was also writing and commenting, but I was more focused on the sound part, because it's what I know more, but Jānis was also collaborating, advising me on songs and lyrics, so this was very collaborative.

### Can you resume a little bit about what *The Last Night of the Deer* is about?

Jānis: I think if I trace back, then in December, we had this very important source from Eduardo Kohn's anthropology book *How Forests Think* that is based on many years of field studies. At least for me, that was a different approach on how to think about the communication that is happening between species. For me it was very complicated – imagining that you are a tree, for example, and that kind of thing. Because, honestly, I don't think that really leads somewhere that much for me, or that I can really understand how a tree thinks or what it means to become a tree. When we were going through that work, our shared feeling was that our work should be able to communicate with the audience in a way that you don't need to have a masters in biology or philosophy to connect. In that book, the important part is the transfer of knowledge through storytelling. And, we also tried to keep that. And then we organically arrived at the idea that we needed to have some kind of event, like traveling from Klaipeda to Riga through that snowstorm, and what happens while doing that. And, if you want, you can start to think that this kind of severe snowstorm is an outcome of climate change. These kinds of snowstorms will be happening more and more. But, we also didn't want to say it openly or lecture someone that it is like that. No, if you want, you can go and think in that direction.

Nahuel: I think that book was also very important for me. It changed my way of understanding many things. It was a very nice experience to read this book together with Jānis. Of course, our understandings were not always the same because of having different backgrounds and

ideas. But, most importantly, this book points out this possibility of communication, and at the same time – to the impossibility of communication. The impossibility of "A equals A". That there is also a will to understand the total otherness, the other species. And, I think that that is also something that happened in ourselves – not the impossibility to understand, but the will to understand. And that's why for me, this work is also about friendship. And that is something that we knew, but in a rehearsal, when it was already very close to the premiere, we had had an open rehearsal. In the material we had a moment where we had some kind of a conflict between the two of us. A conflict is a normal thing in theatre, but nobody who saw the run liked that moment. But then, Viesturs, Jānis' cousin said, "But you are a co-pilot". I will never forget that, for me, it was very important. To understand that there is no conflict in that sense...there is just a misunderstanding. But there is a will to find a solution together. And I think that is the beautiful thing about that piece about friendship, that it is about the potentiality of finding an opening to a future that had kind of looked like a dead end.

### What would you say is the most specifically Latvian thing about Jānis? And what is the most Argentinian thing about Nahuel?

Nahuel: Oh, I don't know (*laughs*).

Jānis: There's one thing that we didn't mention about what both places have in common. But, I think it has worked for us helping to connect to the book. The book author's Eduardo Kohn's research was also taking place in South America in Ecuador in a village where people believe in a forest's spirits. And, I think in countries on the periphery, there is still this pathway of thinking and even sometimes even practices have not disappeared in their culture. I think for us this connection is on a different level, but it may help me to connect to someone who has a relationship with that kind of thing. But the most Argentinian thing about Nahuel... well, he has worked on tango shows. And also, he is the person who although he might be as tired as I am, or, he might be falling asleep, he will continue the conversation about this Argentinian band or folk musician, or tell me some story from his life, making me feel as if I was in Nahuel's Argentinian culture podcast. The fact that he is valuing these things that are not even so thrilling, but there is a significant importance and truth about those things for him.

Nahuel: For me, Latvia is Jānis, in a way. He has been my way of meeting this city and country, a city that I now feel very close to. I have learned the city through his eyes. Also, I don't know many other Latvian people, I have to be honest. And I think, from what I have experienced, for me Riga is a little bit like Montevideo, the capital city of Uruguay. There is this feeling of many layers of history coexisting and a certain melancholy in that coexistence. Buenos Aires (the capital of Argentina) is a very melancholic city, the real estate speculation is super hardcore there, and there are changes all the time, while in Riga, I think, it is a bit slower... But I have a feeling that Jānis is a little bit like that, in his person you can feel all these layers. It is not that he is living in the past, but it's not all the time in the future, or not only in the present. There are these three times moving together. And I think that describes both Riga and Jānis. ■

# IMMF

**Chaos and poverty  
world tour**

<b>Chile</b>	<b>1973</b>
<b>Zaire</b>	<b>1980</b>
<b>Romania</b>	<b>1982</b>
<b>Russia</b>	<b>1992</b>
<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>1997</b>
<b>Brazil</b>	<b>1999</b>
<b>Argentina</b>	<b>2001</b>
<b>Latvia</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>Greece</b>	<b>2010</b>



House of Labrys by IevaKrish

## IEVA-KRISH: OUT OF THE (BLACK)BOX

Artist duo *IevaKrish* consists of internationally working dancers/choreographers and set designers Ieva Gaurilčikaitė-Sants (Lithuania) and Krišjānis Sants (Latvia). Krišjānis studied dance in the Latvian Academy of Culture and P.A.R.T.S. in Belgium, but Ieva acquired her professional education in Scotland SSCD (2015) and Israel (2016). Both artists have also completed master-level studies in scenography at the Latvian Art Academy. Their practice uses a hybrid of choreography and scenography to create immersive and reactive experiences with their audience, and they work in a wide range of forms and media – from direct guided experiences between the artist and individual audience members, to elaborate interactive events that bring larger audience groups together in spectacles of dance, food, collective massage and breathing workshops. Ieva and Krišjānis have co-founded and run a performance art company *TUVUMI* that aims to develop the experimental stage arts environment in Latvia and to create a shared art environment both between Latvia and the Baltics as well as the Baltics and Europe. The couple, who share a child together, spend a lot of time on tours moving between countries. *Specifically Latvian* spoke to them on one of those late nights when the family had just arrived to a new place to get an insight into the everyday life of actively touring dance artists.

### Did you arrive smoothly tonight?

Ieva: Yes, it was quite a calm trip.

Krišjānis: We chose another route through Birži, so we could bypass all the road repairs that were taking place throughout the summer. There were not many trucks, so it was quite pleasant – a beautiful road. There were leaves falling.

### How much time do you spend at home and how much on the road?

Ieva: It depends, there are days or months, mostly in summer, when we go home only to wash and repack things. We travel not only abroad, but also in Latvia, outside of Riga.

Krišjānis: There is no fundamental difference – whether to go to Lithuania or towns in Latvia. Packing is exactly the same. We pay taxes in Latvia, we are based in Riga, our sets for the performances are located in Riga, but we spend a lot of time in Lithuania and other places in Europe.

### How was your last year?

Krišjānis: Regarding last year, we have two professions that usually take us abroad – we work as performing artists for foreign companies...

Ieva: And we are responsible for our own projects. We travel abroad with our own works.

Krišjānis: And in both cases this was a post-Covid year. Because during the Covid pandemic, everything slowed down.

Ieva: In March 2020, we left for Prague, the next day we had a show in Germany, and we had to cross the border quickly before they closed the border. We got to Germany on the day when the quarantine started.

Krišjānis: Our show was not canceled because it was intended for less than 50 visitors.

Ieva: We managed to come to Latvia before the borders were closed here, and that was the end of the tour. With some exceptions, we didn't really get to travel much until this year.

Krišjānis: All the elaborated connections kind of have to be created anew. As authors with our non-visual accessibility work *House of Labrys*, this year we have only traveled to Estonia to the Baltic Dance Platform and to the opening of the new season of the Tanzhaus in Düsseldorf with their new artistic director Ingrida Gerbutavičiūtė.

Krišjānis: As performers we traveled with the Fieldworks, a company based in Belgium and Norway, who have been to the *Homo Novus* Festival several times. I am involved in some seven different projects there, and Ieva in four projects. Just before the Covid restrictions in February 2020, with Fieldworks we traveled to Japan, to the Yokohama International Performing Arts Meeting, and performed three shows in Tokyo. It looked like we would soon go everywhere as performers, but then everything stopped, and those contacts have to be established anew. Now there is a higher competition in the market between works that should have been shown, which were not shown and were re-created.

Ieva: We were also teaching a course on space and dance at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. Which is a new thing and the third profession bringing us abroad.

### How do you establish these international contacts?

Ieva: First, we have both studied abroad, and for me living in Latvia is also living abroad. I think every encounter is very different. We came to Düsseldorf because the new artistic director is a Lithuanian, who saw us with a completely different work *Uzdzist / Infade* in 2018 on the Latvian Dance Platform. And that work really appealed to her at that time, she remembered us.

Krišjānis: We have known many people in the European dance community since our student years. And whenever there is an opportunity to go abroad or participate in some foreign context, we take this opportunity. Then, at some point that information accumulates, you meet the same person again and you start to have a common conversation about what can be offered. For example, in 2015, I was in the same EU project with Ingrida Gerbutavičiūtė called *Identity.Move* and later in 2019 she supervised the stage where we pitched project ideas for *Labrys*. So before the invitation to Düsseldorf we had already had a handful of meaningful meetings. Of course, there are cases when it doesn't happen or doesn't go as planned.

Ieva: I must say that we are consciously working on it. That is our choice – we try to actively establish contacts and participate. Also, for the platforms... we applied for the second Baltic Dance Platform in Tallinn and we were selected.

Krišjānis: We continue to apply, because we have something to offer abroad.

### What is your motivation to work internationally?

Krišjānis: One thing is our international study experience, and another is that, unlike classical theatre, dance is not limited by language. So, we have no reason to think only within the borders of Latvia. There is the artistic aspect, and the financial aspect. When we started working and paying taxes in Latvia, we soon realized that in the Latvian financial system, be it a festival, an individual work or regional traveling works, all involved parts always apply for the Culture Capital Foundation (KKF) funding. And their budget is what it is. Meanwhile, one way to co-finance projects is to export finished works abroad. You can call it the exporting of art, but you can also call it economical ecology. If you have invested resources in the creation of work, and reached the limit of your audience, then there is absolutely no reason not to go elsewhere.

Ieva: There is also the aspect that we are not a repertory theater. We are independent artists. We do not have a space here where we could perform this work again and again. It is quite difficult to work purposefully outside of Riga... Everyone is ready to accept something, but no one is ready to write a project or commit their funding. If we want to present a show in the region of Latvia, we must not only say - please take us, but we also have to often finance ourselves. But, in any case, we try to create works so that they can tour abroad or outside of Riga.

Krišjānis: We exist in the format of guest performances. It is easier to organize a performance with a stable partner abroad, than in a less stable place in the



Satikt by IevaKrish

Latvian region. We are not unique in this situation. For example, professor Olga Žitluhina also works in a form of guest performances. It depends on where those contacts are. She traveled a lot to China. There are others who have completely moved abroad. It probably happens less often in contemporary theatre which feels more self-sufficient.

Ieva: If you make a show in the theatre, like Dailes Theatre, it also belongs to the theatre and it is not easy to show it elsewhere. If you make it for a space you know, then you adapt it to that space, and it becomes difficult to move it. So, you remain local. Since we don't have our own space, we rehearse where we can... The first *Labrys* performance we were rehearsing outside on the AB dam. Because there wasn't any other space big enough for us to rehearse. Also, traveling allows you to cover a wider, more varied audience, not to stick with one taste.

Krišjānis: Working internationally is also connected to the cultural-political and even geopolitical security situation. It is necessary to intertwine that big space of myth – to connect Latvia with Baltic States, to connect the Baltics with Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, the West. Showing our work, performing in the public space in Düsseldorf, for example, we bring our vibe there. We are noticed, and potentially that German viewer will feel more that the Baltics are a part of Europe. It should not be forgotten that the exchange of art and culture is about building a common myth between us and the rest of the world.

#### How would you describe the context in which you work?

Ieva: It is difficult to say what the contribution would be from the Baltic states outside of the political aspect. Europe is a vast place and very mixed.

Krišjānis: Maybe the specific thing is that our works are not black box works. They are a specific approach to space and space solutions. Maybe it is the result of a tough situation, in Riga we simply don't have many black-box theatres. There are so few of them that we haven't made any work in the black box since leaving school. Of course, this is also our choice – to not try not to get inside such types of theatres. Our dance field and spectator area are united, not separated like in the black box. Our contribution is, on the one hand, maybe cool and interesting, on the other hand, it sometimes makes it difficult to get into the wider network, but the system that exists in Europe is more or less based on the black-boxes, and we give the jury a headache.

Ieva: And it is sometimes for 33 viewers, not 400. This is a difficult format, and that's why we repeat it many times.

#### How long can a dance work live?

Ieva: Our works are never completely ready. For example, we premiered *Labrys* on AB Dam in 2019, and we are still developing it. It has evolved into another project, *House of Labrys*. After the show in Tallinn, before going to Düsseldorf, we worked on it thoroughly, because the audiences are very different. Each time the work meets the viewer, it appears in a different light. We learn something new about it and improve it for the next time. And we go on, until we are satisfied. It seems that it went well in Düsseldorf, now we will try to show it again in Riga.

Krišjānis: In 2015, the Swedish artist Erik Eriksson and I made the work *Vērpēte / Whirl* together. We showed it 14 times in Latvia and once in Sweden, but for some reason it did not go further abroad. We didn't understand something in these processes... The work still seems interesting to us and potentially interesting to the viewer, and this year we decided to revive it. We staged it again, this time designing it for specific places in Sweden and Lithuania. Otherwise, if you work in all directions, the work may very well disappear internationally. Maybe you don't get to one place, but you might get to another. Sometimes even a rejected application helps.

Ieva: I think, during these seven years you have matured as authors, and the show has matured itself.

Krišjānis: What I wanted to say is that works do not expire, but they do not always find the audience immediately. Ieva and I, we are working slowly. And that is the case for many artists. The life-cycle for a new creation is two years. If you work on something for two years, showing it only a few times is not enough.

Ieva: Sometimes after a premiere you are still in great emotional anxiety, whether you will be accepted or not.

Krišjānis: Sometimes there is not enough time to be ready for the premiere in Latvia. Not enough time for rehearsals, not enough financing. The more you repeat the work, the more it matures, the more you understand what this material is about. Ieva and I often say that we are materialists, meaning that we don't work with the ideas, but with the material, and little by little we discover the ideas that our working material carries. ■

*Satikt* – 6 Nov, 15.00, dance exchange programme  
HOROS, Aizpute, Latvia

*House of Labrys* – 3 & 4 Dec, 17.00, Latvian National  
Museum of Art, Riga, Latvia

*Vērpēte / Whirl* – 7 Jan, Riga, Latvia (tbc)

*Vērpēte / Whirl* – 6–12 Feb on tour in the Dalarna region  
(Falun, Orsa, Idre, Smedjabaken), Sweden

## WANT TO STAND OUT? MAKE A BLOODY BRILLIANT PRODUCTION!

Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča, AITC/IATC National Section of  
Latvia, music and theatre critic, researcher

Theatre wanderings or travelling with a purpose to get acquainted with foreign performing arts has been part of my life for a pretty long time. Visiting different festivals, conferences, showcases or randomly sneaking into some productions just because of being there that evening in that particular city is a source of professional adrenaline despite the fact that I am not a theatre maker, nor a producer interested in bringing something fresh to some requiring audience in a wealthy Western European country or to enlighten the provincial periphery on contemporary performing arts. As a theatre critic, I explore the cultural ecosystems and codes, creative strategies and peculiarities of thinking in different countries and communities, immersing myself in a diversity of interpretations and questioning the essential emotional and intellectual needs in the most sophisticated way. Theatre is always about interaction in a large variety of utterances, and it actually doesn't matter if the interaction is achieved through building or breaking the fourth wall, representation, presentation, performance, physical or intellectual triggers or other stimuli.

Exploring theatre increases the awareness of ongoing processes better and deeper than consuming mass media content. The different languages of the performing arts tell us a lot about the society, topical issues and concerns, pride and prejudices, strengths and weaknesses, fears, traumas and current state of affairs of that particular country, nation or community. Theatre is like a blood test, there's a lot of information, but not everything is easily interpretable. The conversations among professionals, especially theatre critics, who likewise wander around festivals and showcases, is the best academy to proliferate the understanding of producers and curators eager to promote the productions of their respective companies and countries abroad. The festival lions are used to a large number of shows, where one follows the other in turn, they have seen almost everything and their perception is trained to handle boredom, to embrace the excitement and to stay cool when it comes to debate. In my experience, there have been passionate discussions until dawn, high-school type collective runaways from the second acts of relatively good productions of world classics, established partnerships and collaborations in academic and non-academic environments, an interaction with theatre makers finding out that there is no gap between us, unless it was made on purpose to maintain the imaginary opposite camps of practitioners and theoreticians.

The understanding comes through interaction, openness and the wish to dig deeper into the varying contexts of the performance that have captured the attention, and question the reasons for total failures experienced from time to time. In short – the more you see, the more you understand. I admire nations contributing seriously to translations of their latest plays in English or Spanish, such as the Croats, I share the wish to show to professional audiences the diversity of theatre languages and new names on stage as Lithuanians do in their national showcase, I cherish the strong statements of Estonians when it comes to discussing issues of vulnerability among, say, female actresses, in visually and conceptually challenging productions by male directors. There is no one single right approach or recipe to make a production internationally visible or eligible to one or another particular festival, as there is always a bunch of collateral things to cope with – from ideologies and interests of financial supporters to technical requirements and communication activities. Good theatre is convertible despite language barriers and different culture codes, historical contexts and transgression issues of any kind. And, as they say, the gems do not lie on the ground for long, they are usually picked up. Caring about making good theatre is what matters more than trying to fit into any temporary appropriate box or touring-favourable formats. ■

## SAMOVAR CIRCLES – FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE

Marika Čerņavska, theatre teacher



From December 2021 to October 2022, I participated in the working group of Nordic and Baltic artists, the think tank, *Samovar Circles*. It was conceived as a “collective catalyst for ideas in which the circus, performing arts and cultural organizations from six countries cooperate amongst themselves in order to tackle the ‘effects and challenges sparked by the Covid-19 epidemiological crisis’ and to jointly shape models for the new ‘post-crisis horizon’”.

In order to characterize this project, I want to go through the experience with four self-invented value filters I’ve come up with. If I were to summarize the signature marks of a contemporary circus, such as I see it, I would say that, first of all, it’s physical, readily playing around with the very limit of human ability (chiefly physical ability) and eagerly putting it to the test; secondly, it’s playful, curious and investigative; thirdly, it aims to be friendly, open and available to all; lastly, it tries to be sustainable in a very broad meaning, from the environment to the artist’s body and mind.

I encountered all the mentioned signs during the think tank process: four face-to-face meeting events in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Kaunas and Riga, two face-to-face master classes in Kaunas and Riga and a series of additional things that took place in my professional life this year under the inspiration of the *Samovar* think tank. That is why I could even say that my life became a veritable circus this year... in the best sense of the term.

### Physicality and pushing boundaries

I’m abroad for the first time in eight years. I notice how insecure I’ve become, afraid even, of going into the unknown. But only the first couple of steps have been difficult; the think tank resonates with me, serving as a mover, a launching mechanism for thoughts, processes and the exchange of fresh air. Our team is meeting at a time when almost two years of Covid restrictions are behind us, with our bodies and brains literally, physically numb. It’s a huge relief that we are starting without any huge responsibilities. We’re simply going somewhere, listening, observing and sharing.

There’s a task that proves challenging to me: our meeting plan, (except in Copenhagen, perhaps, where the meeting had a smaller scale), which is always a veritable hodgepodge of festivals, conferences, pitch sessions etc. and as such, full of appointed time slots, events and places to go to, tickets to choose and purchase. At first, I felt the anxiety of a provincial, but later, I noticed I had the excitement of a hunter: to find a trail, choose it, deal with it. It is hard to imagine what practical difficulties others struggle with, but for me this is a good school, training me in independence.

### Playfulness and a spirit of exploration

The fact that this is a project with almost no countable/visible results, has a liberating effect, but at the same time it’s confusing: how, is it really allowed for us to spend time so aimlessly? And the need for self-discipline is growing – I have to take care of my own feelings for what’s meaningful: how much and what I should invest in (time, ideas, listening), what, and how much I will receive back (should I attend the performances, workshops and all the rest that’s available in the project to the maximum that’s humanly possible, or, if I should pursue this in a relaxed manner)? In what ways will I use what’s obtained/seen/understood... and will I do it at all?

We live in a world of high standards for productivity, so not setting productivity goals is a luxury. Such as partaking in the non-workshop, which takes the form of a walk and ends with a meal we prepare together (the workshop in Kaunas, led by Agnietė Lisičkinaitė),

or to have conversations where it is not clear from the beginning what benefit we could get from them. It also seems fresh and interesting to me to study, I would say even to “crochet around” the main issues of discussion (support for young people, future cooperation, etc.) in different ways: through a game, a protest action, a walk in nature, dancing, being silent and looking into another’s eyes, through a conversation in pairs, in groups, all together, returning to the question from very different angles (Merel Heering’s master class in Riga). On many occasions I wonder as to how this model could become truly open for the diverse spectrum of artists – to those who don’t speak English that well (or are deaf and hard of hearing), to those who aren’t as used to navigating online maps, transport tables, big cities and such instances of international collaboration.

### Friendliness, openness, accessibility

I think that at least 10 times, if not more in this project, everyone has to briefly state who they are and where they’re from. My narrative is changing. First of all, it becomes more considered. The other tasks, too, like discovering where you’re situated in terms of income, age, and education, make you speak frankly and give a clearer picture of the spectrum which we represent as a group.

In Copenhagen, I choose accommodation in a place called *City Hub*. It’s a capsule that is only suitable for sleeping at night. However, the shared spaces (including the kitchen and showers) are spacious, cosy and invite one to leave one’s nest to spend time with others. To me, this symbolizes a way of sharing a space, or, perhaps, even the whole world. If private luxuries were scaled down, there would be more resources for the common good. I feel that there is an inspiring energy in this model that should be applied much more widely and more radically.

An observation I’ve made over the past few months is that when we say that a contemporary circus integrates people, that it’s accessible to everyone, we’re exaggerating quite a bit. At the same time, one cannot miss the fact that it wants to be friendly, accommodating and accessible. Even though equal opportunities are a long way away, I cannot help but notice the desire for humaneness and accessibility, like I had witnessed in this year’s *Homo Novus* Festival that reminded me something that I’ve experienced, perhaps, only in Germany or France at festivals of inclusive art: a party that truly welcomes everyone.

### Sustainability

Sustainability is a term we use a lot. As long as we’re a relatively sparsely-populated country where there’s water to drink along with room for cattle, vegetables and waste, it’s a challenge to become intimately acquainted with the planet’s ecological context or to truly shake up one’s habits. Small steps taken each day are a good answer. And the think tank does offer the option of taking such small and sustainable steps. I noticed them – thanks!

I often see shows where an essential part of the message is about how hard it is to be an acrobat. It’s physically challenging – it hurts, it makes you sweat and breathe heavily. It becomes progressively more difficult to stay in this profession as you age. And as you bring up children.

This is also part of the topic of sustainability. I’m 46, as I get older, it’s not easy to stay in good physical condition, and it’s even more difficult to concentrate on intense creative work, to switch from work to home and vice versa, or to switch between assignments. I feel that several artists are interested in these matters and I, too, feel like delving deeper into this topic – on my own at first, and, perhaps, eventually coming to offer support to other artists facing their physical and psychological vulnerability as the years go by.

As the think tank was first announced, it was described as potentially being a place where “inspiration can flow and new models of tomorrow can emerge”. And there is inspiration, spurred on by the *Samovar Circles*, both in me and, I believe, in others from our group as well. It is probably out of place to talk about what could happen tomorrow. Still, I find it very useful to remind oneself about one’s values, perhaps even reach an agreement about them, and keep them where they’re easily seen, “on the control panel”. Just as I find it worthwhile to renew one’s standards for meaningful communication, collaboration, art processes and leadership. I renewed mine by meeting artists I’d like to work with, leaders I’d like to take after, and an art environment I’d like to shape and sustain myself. This means that, at the end, I do have the models for tomorrow in my pocket, in the form of examples that encourage one to grow, change, and keep on moving long after the initial trigger has drawn to a halt. ■

## BALTIC TAKE OVER IN HELSINKI 2023

Maarja Kalmre, project manager and part of the curator’s team in Kanuti Gildi SAAL / festival SAAL Biennaal



The *Baltic Take Over* festival that will take place in the city of Helsinki in June 2023 aims to introduce Baltic work, under the lens of Baltic curators. With the generous support and faith of Helsinki-based organisations, this project will take control of how this Baltic identity is presented and give an opportunity to meet a diverse audience across four different locations.

### What is BTO – where did the idea come from?

BTO is short for *Baltic Take Over*, which is a Baltic contemporary performing arts festival that’s going to take over Helsinki in June 2023. Sometimes we need an outer gaze and voice to bring ourselves together. Bek Berger, the curator of *Homo Novus* and artistic director of New Theatre Institute of Latvia, approached Kanuti Gildi SAAL (Estonia) and Lithuanian Dance Information Centre (Lithuania) with the idea to make Baltic artistic voices be heard outside of our countries and to let people know that our artists have an interesting and unique point of view about arts and practices in general. Also, it was clear that the intention was to connect Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian artists for inspiration, possible future collaborations and also to gain knowledge about what is happening in the art scenes of our close neighbours. In recent history this kind of project has never happened, and I think Bek is an excellent lead for that, with a vast know-how of what is happening outside all over the world but also in the local contemporary performing arts scene.

### What is the curatorial approach in this project?

We have nine performances altogether from three countries in the festival. Some of them are large groups, some are solos. I think the main difference, as opposed to just going to the festival with all these performances, are the artist assemblies and get-togethers that take place before. Sharing practices, going to shows and talking about art and life in very laid-back environments and getting to know each other has been a blast. During those meetings we have already become close colleagues and friends, even though we are performing in different venues during the festival. All the artists know who is who and what the other artist’s practice is. It’s not just a formal or superficial connection. But, that also means that we had to choose artists who are willing to go this extra mile and make these assemblies happen.

### What are the art spaces in Finland you are cooperating with?

Kiasma / URB, Annantalo, Viirus Theatre and Mad House Helsinki.

### Has the work in the assemblies been productive?

I personally don’t believe in putting artists in the same room and expect that great collaborations and idea exchange will start already from the get-go. I really appreciate the chill environment and getting to know each other on our own terms and tempo. Great art is never forced.

Each assembly has been different, there have been some more serious workshops, some great shenanigans, discussing and even arguing on different subjects, partying, going to see performances, reflecting on them and of course singing karaoke. Now the more pressing tasks of putting together the programme, mapping out the festival aim and working with the venues in Helsinki is starting. ■



BTO assemblée in Aknīste, June 2022



## DANCE AND THEATRE ARTIST RŪDOLFS GEDIŅŠ ON BTO ARTISTS' ASSEMBLIES

Dance and theatre artist Rūdolfs Gediņš on BTO artists' assemblies



Even though the calendar doesn't agree, it seems like about a year has passed since the name Baltic Take Over first came up at a weekly meeting of the theatre troupe *KVADRIFRONS*. An event organized by The New Theatre Institute of Latvia, an event that would include both exchange trips and a festival, which, back then, still seemed like something distant and nebulous. With

fast-approaching premieres, ever-looming lockdowns etc., nobody had the strength or the inspiration to truly dedicate themselves to this issue. But we did pick up some important keywords, among them "international", "choice", "paid" and a few others. The offered result – participation in a theatre festival in Helsinki in summer 2023 – motivated us to hold dedicated meetings for mapping out the work we are to create for this event. We had to pick two people to represent the organization and go to Vilnius in spring for the artists' assembly. In hindsight, I can say I was truly lucky to be one of them. After the first meeting, I was intent on doing everything I could to ensure I'd be there for the following two BTO sessions in Aknīste and Rakvere.

Me and theatre director Klāvs Mellis visited Vilnius (Lithuania) as the representatives of *KVADRIFRONS*. Klāvs was there to represent the festival *Sansusi* as well. The event description had suggested we'd be going there with the express purpose of meeting our Baltic colleagues and getting a glimpse of their creative practices. We wouldn't have to prepare anything, create anything or make hasty decisions we would have to live with throughout the entire project. For those couple of days, our lives would be in the hands of the artists of the host country... Incredibly, that is exactly how it turned out. We spent almost four days in informal workshops, and as we went to performances and wandered around Vilnius at night, we made friends not only with the new-generation dance and theatre artists from Lithuania and Estonia, but also with local colleagues with whom we had had the chance to share the same place and time.

In the second BTO session in Aknīste (Latvia), almost the entire staff of *KVADRIFRONS* was present, and, as the event drew closer, it felt as if I was going to a summer camp following a year of study in order to meet the friends that seemingly don't fit in my "real life". But, in this "camp", everyone is, for lack of a better word, a

cool artist. This session was in the hands of Latvian representatives and consisted of co-created alternative art events. Due to the peripheral location of the place, we shared a lot more in household responsibilities and also in socializing and partying, while having long discussions and even arguments about art and different beliefs held in a much more familiar manner. As the Aknīste session drew to a close, everyone expressed a sincere desire to meet in Rakvere, sharing plans to visit one of the neighbouring countries in the nearest future.

The Rakvere (Estonia) session was held concurrently with the theatre festival *BALTOSCANDAL 2022*, and this made visiting it all the more appealing, even though this time *KVADRIFRONS* was officially represented by my colleagues Reinis Boters and Paula Pļavniece. Thanks to Maarja Kalmre, a new friend and comrade in the struggle to do a *Baltic Take Over* of Helsinki, me and my wife Elina Gediņa got both a place to stay as well as tickets to all the festival performances that we could possibly visit. The excitement I felt over experiencing the Pleiad of performances could be paralleled only by the joy of meeting fellow BTO members, some of whom I can by now call my friends.

It is still rather unclear as to what will take place in Helsinki next June, and how. Experience from the past couple of years attests that all plans can be unexpectedly disrupted by a pandemic or any unexpected events, we live a little paranoid still. And there's always the chance that we, artists from the Baltics, can also fail utterly and tarnish our reputation... In that case the task to "take over" and "charm" Scandinavia will be bequeathed to the next generation. But one thing is clear – to date, the *Baltic Take Over* has proven that the drama of life is of a predictably banal character, because I have to resort to an outrageous storytelling cliché to describe what's it been like thus far: the real treasure is the friends we made along the way. ■

## WITH LOVING EYES FOR LATVIA

Interview with Bek Berger, curator of the International Festival of Contemporary Theatre *Homo Novus* and artistic director of the New Theatre Institute of Latvia, which produces and presents projects and long-term collaboration programmes together with local and international partners regularly organizing the Latvian Theatre Showcase. This year, with the Showcase Academy, the Institute has chosen to focus on education rather than presentation to provide Latvian theatre industry professionals with additional opportunities to realize their stage art works at an international level. In conversation, Bek reveals the reasons that led to this choice, presents the mentors of the Academy programme and shares personal and professional advice from her experience as a curator, creative producer and artist who has worked internationally for fifteen years.

### Why did you decide to hold a Showcase Academy instead of a theatre showcase this year?

Just over a year ago, we were all unable to do anything in the theatre – we were in a lockdown, in complete crisis. But there is this remarkable transition that's happened from being in lockdown with zero prospects of theatres opening again to this point of overproduction and this rampant showing of premieres that had been made during the pandemic. And now, this time, when we have all this incredible artwork, we thought maybe instead of over-producing and producing another showcase let's reflect on the skills that would ensure the success [of these performances to travel]. Let's look for the potential gaps in education, knowledge or practice that exist within the wider industry on every level. Let's reflect on how to ensure the best possible chance of an international platform being successful, really looking at the tools that are needed to make that happen.

### What are those tools?

The main tools are communication tools, marketing language, technical riders, dossiers, all the very technical marketing materials that are simply not required in Latvia, because between each other, we know these things, right? We also want to dive deeper into where each individual artist, artists, theatres and practitioners' work sits best in the world, because not every artist fits every context. We are looking at the possibilities of artistic resonance, of financial context, of audience. And through the lines of different ideas from curators, we are using this Showcase Academy to identify where the best possible place for each person could be. That's speculative, of course, but we will try to identify which festivals specifically, or what house or what theatre specifically, would resonate most with the concrete work, or more generally, it would be around a country or its geographical locations. Because the work that might be really appropriate for a festival in a mainstage in Poland probably doesn't fit a festival in the south of Italy. They're just not compatible generally, in context. So, it means mapping out this kind of bigger context.

Then we will also be talking about the language and the tools that are required to imagine an artwork in a space, what the tools are that are generally needed, when pitching a work or describing a work in the space... And, given the tools like this, producing videos, producing different ways for curators or programmers to imagine your artwork or an artwork in their space. These are really specific skills that [are necessary] in the performing arts industry as a whole.. It's about building this knowledge network to be able to make this happen. So, with Showcase Academy, we're trying to overcome that quicker, by providing these incredible minds to the participants who have been doing this both as programmers and artists.

### How did you choose the mentors for the Showcase Academy? Who are these people?

There's this nice mix of perspectives. But first of all, these are international eyes that look lovingly at Latvia. So, they're not foreign eyes in a foreign way, they are looking at us through our context, over a longer period of time. So, we have Roman Pawlowski, the theatre curator and deputy artistic director at *TR Warszawa*, who was the curator of the Baltic Transfer festival in Warszawa (in 2021) and has spent a good year and a half researching what is happening across the Baltic states and really handpicking works to then feed into



Bek Berger, International Festival of Contemporary Theatre *Homo Novus* 2022

this whole festival. He's a playwright, a critic and a dramaturg himself, also the one of the programmers of the house, who already loves Baltic work. Julia Asperska joins us with multiple identities and positions within an international performing arts ecology. She is one of the associate curators of *Tanzmesse* – the largest European dance platform, she collaborated with performing arts organization and agency *Something Great* (Berlin) on their collection project and she has been responsible for significant tours from her collaborators in Uruguay. Julia truly has an international practice as she is based in Poland while maintaining all these relations. And then we have Laia Montoya who is both an agent and producer from *TINA Agency*. She is working in a different way as someone who is looking at the distribution of artists, across borders and contexts. She works with an opera company that is based in Germany, as an individual choreographer, and then everything in between consulting across Germany and Spain. She is working with artists, advising how to better communicate themselves to presenters, to agents, to people that can help them move their workplaces. And she is a big fan of Riga, she came to the *Homo Novus* Festival in 2019 and a symposium called the Possible Futures Forum, she is still connected with many Latvian practitioners. This is an opportunity to bring her back to Riga to also reconnect with artists and offer advice on how better to communicate work abroad.

### Will you mentor something, too?

I'll be there the whole time, more like a supportive person. Obviously, my experience is one of being a programmer here at *Homo Novus* and being an artistic leader. I think the perspective that I can offer and that is maybe different from everyone else, is the fact that I'm also a touring artist, and have toured more than 20 countries in the last five years with choreographer James Batchelor, so I have this programming and producing perspective on festivals, but as an artist who is quite well known outside of Latvia. So, there's also this duplicity of my identity and I'm happy to share my learnings.

### Any tips from the perspective as a touring artist?

As artists, if we want to form relationships, they can happen by visiting a festival and making yourself known. To see, does my work fit here? Could my work engage with this audience? And, sometimes the answer is no. And, it's okay, I don't need to pursue this relationship or I could pursue it in different ways. Obviously, platforms help, but they are not a sure thing. And, in terms of all the platforms that with my own artistic practice with the choreographer James Batchelor we discovered that the smallest ones that have been the most effective. We have been a part of seven or eight platforms in our career, which is a lot. But actually, just performing in different contexts shows have produced more future work than the showcasing in platforms. The platforms are helping in a strategy of elevating one's practice, but a platform alone will not do that work. It has to be in conjunction with many other things. The key is to meet people, make friends and to genuinely be interested in the context in which people curate. But that's only if you want to tour internationally. I think it's really important to understand that. And, I think it's really important to look at one's work and understand – is this for an international audience or is it specifically local and not really translatable? And, that's fine. That work should exist here, and it doesn't need to go elsewhere. Because touring internationally doesn't mean that it's the best or better. It's just a different mode of working. ■

### Continuation from the cover page

The artistic leader of the New Riga Theatre (NRT), Alvis Hermanis, found a place in the NRT ensemble for the famous Russian actress Chulpan Khamatova who earlier played in Hermanis's productions *Shukshin's Stories* and *Gorbachev* produced by the Theatre of Nations in Moscow. Khamatova is notorious for her explicit support of Putin during the presidential elections in Russia in 2012. However, already after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, she started publicly criticizing Putin's regime and gradually became a *persona non grata* in Russia. The ambiguity of Hermanis' decision was briefly reflected in social media (why the NRT equally did not provide a place for any Ukrainian artist is still an open question). However, generally it was part of an obvious manifestation of a long-term Russian soft power strategy in Latvia. In the Latvian public sphere and media, a lot of Russian intellectuals fleeing from Russia got a voice and sympathy instead of the much less represented Ukrainian voices. Hermanis created a solo-performance for Khamatova *Post Scriptum* on texts by Dostoyevsky and Politkovskaya reflecting on Russian identity and its eternal suffering, which attracted international interest and was nominated as the best large-scale performance for the National Theatre Award. In spring, the NRT also included in the repertoire the Ukrainian playwright Natalka Vorozhbyt's play *Bad Roads* – scenes from the war in 2014 – directed by Kristine Krūze-Hermane. This important gesture has compromised itself as the fast and not thoroughly thought through staging process entrusted to a little experienced theatre director has led to simplifying artistic decisions, and the text itself is the strongest part of performance.

This year the landscape of theatre festivals in Latvia marked a few noticeable turns. Three theatres – DDT, GIT and the Rēzekne Theatre *Yorick* – in collaboration with the Ventspils Theatre House *Jūras vārti* established the new *Theatre Festival No. 1* in Ventspils. Its aim was not only to introduce contemporary theatre in the regional city known for a conventional taste in its population but also to create a space and time for a professional discussion among theatre makers about the future of performing arts. A few foreign guests including some Ukrainian artists were inspired to envision the future of this festival as an international platform. The 7th Valmiera Summer Theatre Festival as always was focused on new productions of site-specific performances. Two of the premieres might have an international potential. One of them is the music theatre performance *The Cold Virgin* after short stories of the Danish writer Jorn Riel composed by one of the most promising young generation composers Anna Ķirse (Fišere), visually interpreted by well-known Latvian artist Katrīna Neiburga, and directed by Klāvs Mellis from the theatre company *KVADRIFRONS*. Another performance, *Near and Far*, features the youngest generation of theatre makers and poets who freely structure the performance about their feelings of being home and homeless. The International Contemporary Theatre Festival *Homo Novus* this year continued its path undertaken by its new curator Bek Berger away from theatre circles and towards the inclusion of still marginalized communities – such as deaf people, the queer community, disabled people and alike. New audiences have responded and filled up the performances and club events praising the openness and inclusiveness of the festival. The Student Festival of Performing and Audiovisual Arts *Patriarch's Autumn* organized by the Latvian Academy of Culture besides presenting student performances and films announced the ceremony of Latvian Theatre Anti-Awards *The Golden Fly*. It was a kindly ironic look of the youngest generation of theatre makers at the processes in Latvian theatre awarding artists who have lost or changed their identity, performances that are difficult to understand and similar phenomena. Let's hope that the ability to laugh at oneself will save the world! ■

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS. FEEDBACK FROM THE YOUNGEST CURATORS

The *Shake Down* team of young curators who programmed part of this year's Festival of Contemporary theatre *Homo Novus* are currently programming the Bastard Festival that will take place at the Rosendal Theatre in Trondheim in April 2023. We asked the teenage curators from Latvia to share their experiences of getting to know international artists and how they chose them for their festival framework.

### What were your criteria when choosing artists for the longlist of the programme?

Samuels: I tried to consider artists whom I already knew, who were not completely new to me, whom I have either seen or heard about or with whom I have already spoken to while working on the first festival *Shakedown*



Samuels Ozoliņš

*Homo Novus* – about whom I already have some in-depth knowledge. Then I tried to sort the ones I liked according to the keywords of the festival concept: community, shelter, power, environment.

Ikars: I nominated an artist whose work I have experienced. I didn't want to choose someone whose art I hadn't seen at all. It often occurs to me that I read something about an artist and there is a certain picture that appears in my head, but when I attend that event or exhibition... I wouldn't say it is always worse than I had imagined, but it is different. Personally, I am very interested in how visual art and theatre connect and how they can mutually enrich each other, and there are many of them, of course. But I remember that we've had discussions with our Norwegian colleagues about conservatism in art in Norway, and I tried to take that into account. I wouldn't choose such a criterion for my festival, which is aimed at me, but I tried to take it into account. I like the contemporaneity and silliness in art, and also artists who highlight those people who are not so often represented in arts. And choosing from the local artists, of course, there was also the practical aspect – how



Estere Dimitere

it is possible to make them travel and adapt their work in another place.

Alberts: I was making my choice not really by going through the lists of artists, but through the festivals I know. When we were preparing for the first festival in May, we were given many brochures from the international festivals. I have seen the names of many interesting theatre companies, and then I explored what associations or platforms they have joined, and through them I discovered other interesting artists. For me, mainly the starting point was the homepage of the *Homo Novus*

and *Sirenos* festivals. It was mainly associative jumping from the artist's name to the companies, to the places and cooperative projects they have worked on.

Karu: I looked at artists who had already been at *Homo Novus* in previous years or at other festivals they have worked on. In every link, I found a new link that would take me to another artist. It was important for me to think about what the Norwegian team expects from us, the framework and the keywords of the festival. I didn't want to put something on the longlist that is cool, but not really related to the concept. Also, I paid attention to whether the artist was too famous, because then they would be out of our league and we just couldn't afford it. How do I know if they are out of our league? Mostly, you can't find the costs on the internet, but you can check the number of followers on their social media and how often they make new works and where they are shown.

Estere: There is so much information that it is easy to get confused. So, I stuck to the works that I had really seen myself, and since I haven't seen that many, it wasn't that difficult to choose. I mainly looked at candidates from Estonia and Lithuania, because it is easier to connect with something that is closer... it is somehow closer to my heart, also I really want to show some Latvian work in Norway. Therefore, my votes mainly went to Latvia and the Baltic States. I also wanted a dance work, so I chose a couple of choreographers. I just wanted it so... And dancers often don't need any big scenography space, well, it is less complicated in terms of resources and transportation.



Ikars Graždanovičs

### How much can you learn about the artist from their websites?

Ikars: There were some websites that maybe even had a nice and interesting visual design, but if the content suddenly doesn't work, I can't open the video or picture gallery, then I'm - uhh, ok... I can't share it with others. You read the description, you try to open the video and there is just a black screen. That annoyed me the most! There was one website on our longlist that I didn't really like visually, but I assumed it was simply a different style – it wasn't objectively bad. So, I tried not to vote solely on my personal taste, which is hard...

Samuels: Quite a few of the websites that were on the list did not give the impression that this artist wanted me to click on their website, that I should see them, that their work was important. If I open a website and can't figure out where to click to see their biography or a list of their works – I'm not really motivated to try any further. It seems funny, why would the artist not want a curator or producer to be able to see them not only at the live festival, but also through the website... I don't know. I hate searching through 3 separate sections to get to what I need.

Karu: I don't have such strong emotions about websites. As a person I respect not using the Internet, all respect, but as a curator – not so much. Also, I agree, if looking for my candidates, I saw that someone's website was designed like it was 2006, I would go on to the next one. I don't like websites that are difficult to use. If they are ugly, it is ok, but if they are difficult to understand, I just have the feeling that the person doesn't want to work together.

Alberts: For me no website gives a better impression than a bad one. I do not agree that it gives the impression of a person who does not want to cooperate. I think that it is the artist's free choice, it can show that they know their value or where they emotionally stand. If someone wants to find them, then they will have found them. Then you



Alberts Roze

have to look for the reviews and find out who this person is. I respect that some people don't like creating websites. Often websites are like an artist's portfolio, and maybe they don't want to be perceived now as a reproduction of who they were before. But I agree with Karu that a website form from 2006 makes the eyes hurt.

Estere: When choosing my candidates from the common longlist, there were many names I didn't know, so I read the short description and then clicked on the website. And if I don't like the website, then I don't think it's good. A website is often the only first impression I have of an artist if I haven't seen them in person, so for me it is very important. Just like when I talk about



Karu Treij

elections with my friends – if the party's website is terrible and you can't understand anything, then I don't like the party either. For those parties, which had everything very cool written on their websites, more trust was formed. either seen or heard about or with whom I have already spoken to while working on the first festival *Shakedown Homo Novus* – about whom I already have some in-depth knowledge. Then I tried to sort the ones I liked according to the keywords of the festival concept: community, shelter, power, environment.

### About the Shake Down project

The New Theatre Institute of Latvia and Rosendal Teater in Norway with the support of EEA Grants in 2022 launched a new international cooperation project with the aim to develop a new generation of cultural leaders, who, given the right time and resources, can shift the way we consider young people as collaborators and put them in charge of the creation of culture. Within the programme, 10 teenagers from Norway and Latvia participate in a 15 month mentoring program and co-curate two international performing arts festivals – *Homo Novus Shake Down* in September of 2022 in Riga and a festival in *Rosendal Teater*, Trondheim, in April of 2023. The project has been created with the support of the European Economic Area (EEA) Grants Financial Mechanism funding period 2014. – 2021. program "Local Development, Poverty Reduction, and Cultural Cooperation" open call "Support for the Creation of Professional Art and Cultural Products for Children and Youth". ■

## About NTIL

New Theatre Institute of Latvia (NTIL) is a project based organisation working in the field of contemporary performing arts. Since 1995 NTIL has been organizing the International Festival of Contemporary Theatre Homo Novus, which is the largest performing arts platform in Latvia. NTIL also produces and presents projects and long term collaboration programmes together with local and international partners, strongly believing in the necessity to explore the contemporary performing arts field together with artists and audiences.

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