

# The Revitalization of Popular Theatre Forms in Contemporary Performance

## The Case of Post-Soviet Lithuanian Theatre

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### ABSTRACT

The article examines the use of historical popular theatre forms in contemporary performance and analyses how historical popular theatre forms are revitalized in contemporary theatre.

The first part of the article addresses the phenomena of popular theatre in general. Referring to the insights on this topic by such theatre scholars as D. Mayer (1972), P. Pavis (1998), T. Grammatas (2013) the article addresses the problem of the definition of popular theatre and discusses what are the major characteristics that make the forms of popular theatre into the source of creative renewal and artistic inspiration.

The second part of the article analyses how historical popular theatre practices (such as pantomime, mime, puppetry or shadow plays) have been used by post-Soviet Lithuanian theatre artists – namely, director Gintaras Varnas at *Šėpa* theatre and director Vega Vaičiūnaitė at *Miraklis* theatre – as a stimulus to renew theatrical language and to foster new relationship with theatre audiences. The examples of both companies demonstrate that in spite of the conventional genre restrictions, the historical forms of popular theatre are not treated as an unquestionable museum relic, but rather as a means to create a live and immediate contact with a contemporary audience through universal historical forms.

### KEYWORDS

Post-Soviet Lithuanian theatre; Šėpa theatre; Miraklis theatre; Mime; Puppetry.



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## **The Case of Post-Soviet Lithuanian Theatre**

### **INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

In recent decades, the fields of theatre theory and practice have clearly indicated an increasing interest in the traditions of popular theatre. Signs of this interest include numerous uses of forms of popular theatre in contemporary stage productions, the revival and cherishing of historical genres of popular theatre, and an increased attention to issues of popular theatre in theatre research. This text is an attempt to contribute to the research focused on the issues of popular theatre and to discuss the question why the historical forms and/or techniques of popular theatre are often at the basis of creative renewal and artistic inspiration. The first part of the article addresses the phenomena of popular theatre in general and discusses the problem of the definition of popular theatre. The second part analyses how historical popular theatre practices (such as mime, pantomime, puppetry, or shadow plays) have been used by post-Soviet Lithuanian theatre artists as a stimulus to renew theatrical language and to foster new relationship with theatre audiences.

Although forms of popular theatre have been largely ignored by Western traditions of literary-oriented theatre studies, which have considered it to be a less valuable part of the art of theatre,<sup>1</sup> recent decades have seen issues of popular theatre being brought into focus by theatre researchers. The 1970s were an im-

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<sup>1</sup> Mayer 1977, 259.

portant turning point in this process. A number of conferences were organized on the topic of popular theatre,<sup>2</sup> some special issues of research journals were published<sup>3</sup> and, eventually, it was in 1977 that a ground-breaking publication came out, the proceedings of a Symposium sponsored by the University of Manchester, “Western Popular Theatre”,<sup>4</sup> discussing a variety of practices of popular theatre and its very definition.

From today’s perspective, it is possible to distinguish two factors that marked such a turn of theatre studies towards the issues of popular theatre. Firstly, an increasing interest of theatre practitioners in historical genres of popular theatre and the stylistic variety of popular entertainment can be noted. Although traditions of popular theatre were seen as a possibility for creative renovation already by early modernists of the twentieth century (for example, by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Bertold Brecht, or Antonin Artaud) it was in the 60s and 70s that the forms of popular theatre became extremely attractive and a source of inspiration for many artists. One can remember, for example, a number of political theatre groups (such as *San Francisco Mime Troupe* or *Bread and Puppet Theatre*) that turned to the aesthetic heritage of *commedia dell'arte*, street theatre of the Middle Ages, and puppet theatre traditions; or the interest of directors such as Peter Brook, or Ariane Mnouchkine in the aesthetics of the circus, buffoonery and fairground entertainment. The second factor can be seen in a paradigm shift in the field of theatre studies towards performance studies, encouraging scholars to leave behind the orientation towards the literary text and a refusal to privilege the concept of text-based theatre. Following Richard Schechner’s principle that theatre research should encompass “a ‘broad spectrum’ or ‘continuum’ of human actions” including ‘popular entertainments’,<sup>5</sup> the advocates of per-

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<sup>2</sup> Including the 3<sup>rd</sup> University of Manchester International Theatre Symposium in 1974 or international conference on the “History of American Popular Entertainment” in 1977.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, a special issue of *TDR/The Drama Review* called “Popular Entertainments” in 1974 or a special issue of *Educational Theatre Journal* called “Popular Theatre” in 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Mayer and Richards 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Schechner 2013, 2.

formance studies changed their field of research to include the long ignored genres of popular theatre such as circus, cabaret, burlesque shows, vaudeville, shadow plays, minstrel shows, etc.

Consequently, in the last decades of the twentieth century, popular theatre experienced a kind of revival and a period of legitimation. Popular forms not only figured in different theatre productions and creative projects, but also gained increased importance in the discourse of theatre research. One can suppose that after such uplift, interest in forms of popular theatre should eventually start receding. Theatre scholars, however, point out that contemporary theatre instead shows “signs of new and increasing [...] interest in popular theatre [...] in live puppetry, circus clowning, cabaret and vaudeville.”<sup>6</sup> An unabated interest of theatre producers and researchers in popular theatre traditions proves its importance for contemporary creative practice, while the different manifestations of the popular forms in the field of contemporary performance need a closer investigation.<sup>7</sup>

#### **DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT OF ‘POPULAR THEATRE’**

Although at first sight the term ‘popular theatre’ does not seem to be complicated, many researchers of the phenomenon cannot escape the problem of definition. As theatre researcher David Mayer ably noticed in his often quoted text from 1972 called “Towards a Definition of Popular Theatre”, “it is probably easier and more profitable to describe various popular theatre genres than to define what we mean by the term ‘popular theatre’.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, the concept of popular theatre is used to describe a broad variety of theatrical practices from improvisation-based non-literary theatre forms (such as *commedia dell'arte* or

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<sup>6</sup> Schechter 2003, 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as some researchers would put it, although “the legitimacy of popular entertainment as an object of study has been won”, and the major theatre journals, like *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Survey* or *TDR/The Drama Review* “readily and regularly publish work on popular entertainment genres”, “theatre and performance historians have barely begun to fill the void produced by decades of scholarly neglect of popular theatre and performance.” See: Saltz 2008, x-xii.

<sup>8</sup> Mayer 1977, 257.

pantomime) to mass-oriented commercial performances, from progressive political theatre fighting for social change (e.g. Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*) to the festal processions along city streets. It is not surprising, then, that different theatre researchers point out that "popular theatre" is an elusive term and the phenomena itself defies clear definition.<sup>9</sup>

Reflecting on the elusiveness of the phenomena, theatre researcher Patrice Pavis notes that in order to point out the characteristics of popular theatre one should not focus on what popular theatre *is*, but rather on what it *is not*.<sup>10</sup> After a few references to the historical past (popular theatre, for example, is not "court theatre, whose repertoire was addressed in the seventeenth century to leading citizens and to the aristocratic and financial elite"), Pavis goes on to name main opposites of popular theatre including "elitist, academic theatre", "literary theatre based on inalienable text", "proscenium-arch theatre with its hierarchical and immutable architecture that keeps the audience at a distance."<sup>11</sup> Mayer, in his seminal text, also claims that popular theatre is characterized by a variety of unconventional artistic forms that fall out of the dominant Western theatrical tradition known for privileging an "author" (a playwright or a director), literary text, the ideal of conceptual-aesthetic-structural unity and a relatively passive position of spectator as an observer.<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, the comparison with traditional drama theatre allows us to mark the limits of the field of popular theatre. On the other, set in opposition to the dominant Western tradition of drama theatre, popular theatre is, according to David Charles, "typically viewed as the lesser partner, defined primarily by its

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<sup>9</sup> As Mayer notes, the task to single out the one definition of "popular theatre" or to point out its fixed qualities is a difficult one (if accomplishable at all) as this phenomena resists "limiting", "fixing boundaries", "excluding apparent irrelevancies.", in Mayer 1977, 257. Or as theatre researcher Joel Schechter puts it: "popular theatre's appearance in hybrids, and its wide range of forms are consonant with the genre's tendency to transgress limitations and boundaries.", in Schechter 2003, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Pavis 1998, 278.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Mayer 1977, 265.

lack (of script, literary manifestation or text) rather than its essence.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, contemporary theatre research is marked by attempts to outline the difference of popular theatre from mainstream theatre traditions (described as *aesthetic theatre*, *artistic theatre*, *elitist theatre*, *academic theatre*, *highbrow theatre*, etc.), stressing the different natures of these concepts of theatre and yet, also their equivalent (and often parallel) existence.

For instance, theatre researcher Theodoros Grammatas compares ‘popular theatre’ with ‘highbrow theatre’ and, without devaluing any model, distinguishes major differences between the two concepts of theatre on the different levels, such as text, directing, acting, time/space, and communication with a spectator.<sup>14</sup> According to Grammatas, highbrow theatre is based upon the text written by the author, while popular theatre grows out of (and relates to) oral traditions; highbrow theatre credits the significance of the director’s role, while popular theatre is most often based on the principle of collective creation; highbrow theatre is created by professional actors, using certain methods of acting, while popular theatre appreciates spontaneity, improvisation, and cooperation with non-professional performers; on the level of theatrical time and space, highbrow theatre attempts to construct a stable theatrical continuum, supporting a theatrical illusion, while popular theatre would often disrupt the gap separating the stage from the audience and avoid the construction of theatrical illusion. Eventually, Grammatas points out that the model of popular theatre highly values immediate communication with the audience, and resumes that highbrow theatre and popular theatre represent different communication systems. According to him, these two different communication systems (or these different concepts of theatre), “in their historical course have not been completely separate and independent from one another”, “there has always been a constant dialogue between them, obvious or elusive.”<sup>15</sup> Analysing the interaction of these theatre models and their mutual influences, Grammatas is critical towards the claims

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<sup>13</sup> Charles 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Grammatas 2013, 5-7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

that “the influences are traced as being one-way, from “below” to “above”, that is from the popular (...) to the artistic” and sums up that “the concepts of popular and artistic theatre are complimentary and coexist in an unstable and fluctuating balance, which sometimes favours the one and at other times the other.”<sup>16</sup>

The insights of Mayer, Pavis, Grammatas and other theatre researchers allow us to identify the most general, immanent characteristics of popular theatre, which are recognizable even in the most distant popular theatre practices. However, while analysing the research on these issues it becomes clear that every individual investigation of this topic should have a more narrow and specific definition of popular theatre. Thus, based on various theatre researches, the concept of popular theatre in this text will be used to refer to such artistic practices that lie outside conventional (legitimate, high, artistic) theatres, appeal to broad audiences, and refer to historical “highly visual and physical, portable, orally transmitted, readily understood,”<sup>17</sup> mostly non-literary performance traditions (like mime, pantomime, shadow puppetry, clowning, etc.). In the following part of the article, it will be discussed how such historical popular theatre forms were adapted and reinterpreted in post-Soviet Lithuanian theatre.

## **ADAPTATION OF POPULAR THEATRE FORMS IN POST-SOVIET LITHUANIAN THEATRE**

The turn of the 1990s was a time of noticeable crisis for Lithuanian theatre. As theatre researcher Ramunė Marcinkevičiūtė puts it, since the beginning of the *Sąjūdis* revival movement (which eventually led to the declaration of independence of Lithuania in 1990) “the spectators all together left theatres and went into the streets to make actual history, while new stage premieres became seen as ridiculously unimportant when compared to the new prospects of actual freedom of action. Dealing with this change was not an easy task (for theatre people): the late 1980s had experienced a theatrical boom of crowds of people queuing to get tickets at theatres box-offices and all of a sudden – a cold and bleak emptiness of the house and the public that no one can understand or predict

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> Schechter 2003, 4.



any more.”<sup>18</sup> For Lithuanian society engaged in the ‘singing revolution’<sup>19</sup>, the metaphorical theatre of the 1970s and 1980s, produced by theatre directors like Eimuntas Nekrošius or Rimas Tuminas, was not interesting any more. As Oskaras Koršunovas, a famous Lithuanian director who started his artistic career in 1990, later commented on the situation: in spite of the attempts of theatres “to keep up with what was going on in the country” (e.g. to stage plays by émigré authors that were forbidden in the Soviet years, or plays that problematized national identity) the very pursuit to theatricalize the present was not successful, as “theatre in the streets was much more powerful and effective.”<sup>20</sup>

In their attempt to determine the position and the role of theatre in a radically transformed sociocultural situation and to renew a dialogue with their time and their public, Lithuanian theatre artists plunged into aesthetic experiments. The directors (mostly of the younger generation) looking for a new theatrical language able to reconnect with the audience saw new possibilities, not only in the present theatre (contemporary postmodern and postdramatic theatre of the West), but also in the legacy of the historical theatre trends such as theatrical modernism, historical avant-garde, and neo-avant-garde, i.e. phenomena that were banned in the Soviet years. Consequently, the source of inspiration, among other things, was also found in a variety of less known or, up until then, less used historical forms of popular theatre, e.g. storytelling, mime, puppetry, shadow play, or out-door parades. In this sense, the theatrical experiments in Lithuanian theatre of the first decade of independence exemplify the famous Peter Brook statement that “every attempt to revitalize theatre has gone back to the popular source.”<sup>21</sup>

One can conclude that in their search for a new theatrical language capable of communicating to the changed public, the artists (consciously or not) turned towards those forms of theatre that had a disruptive effect on the mainstream

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<sup>18</sup> Marcinkevičiūtė 2006, 37.

<sup>19</sup> *Singing revolution* is a term used to name events of the national revival movement between 1987-1991 that led to the restoration of the independence of Lithuania.

<sup>20</sup> Koršunovas 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Brook 1968, 68

theatre tradition ('elitist', 'academic', 'literary-based' theatre performed in a traditional theatre space, supposing a relatively passive spectator) and could be employed to offer the audience a new aesthetic and communicative experience.

### **POLITICAL CRITIQUE IN PUPPET THEATRE: EXAMPLE OF ŠĖPA**

One of the first attempts of using historical popular theatre forms as a stimulus to renew dialogue with the audience was the Šėpa theatre. Established in 1988 by a first-year student of stage directing (and now a famous director) Gintaras Varnas together with his peer actors, writers and artists, Šėpa existed until 1992. Šėpa's productions, such as *Lullabies of Revolution (Revoliucijos lopšinės, 1989)* and *Communist Nostalgias (Komunistinės nostalgijos, 1990)*, were filled with sharp political satire. The public was not only attracted to this kind of stinging socio-political criticism and relevant reaction to political and social events so unusual to the dominant Lithuanian theatre tradition, but also to a popular medieval form of portable puppet theatre (a theatre in a closet, which is the meaning of the word 'šėpa') also previously almost unknown in Lithuanian theatre.

As the director Gintaras Varnas remembers, in the days of upheaval and revolution in 1988, "when theatres were empty and the streets were boiling with life", when "the existence of the whole state experienced a major break"<sup>22</sup> and "the very air was electrified with politics,"<sup>23</sup> there was so much to say about the present. Traditional theatre at that time was reserved and self-absorbed, the public was indifferent and traditional artistic forms seemed to be unable to reflect the socio-political shifts. The idea of employing the historical form of puppet theatre, which had once been popular in Eastern Europe (Poland, Ukraine, and Belorussia), came about accidentally after Varnas found out that it was used in Vilnius during the interwar period (when the city belonged to Poland) and was called *Szopka Wilenska* in Polish. It was actually a Christmas puppet show also used in street processions. According to Varnas, his artist friends only planned to make a one-off project, a Christmas performance including hot political con-

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<sup>22</sup> Varnas 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Šabasevičius 2009, 25.

tent, however the first show was unexpectedly so popular that the group of artists “could not stop” and kept on performing it.<sup>24</sup>

Although this form of theatre was absolutely new to the Lithuanian public, the origins of *Šėpa* theatre, as well as of its predecessor *Szopka Wilenska*, can be found in *Szopka* – a traditional Polish Nativity puppet theatre that started in the Middle Ages. According to theatre researchers, a *Szopka* play consists of two parts: the first – ‘serious and religious’ – enacts “the principal episodes of the Nativity”, the second – ‘secular’ – consists of comic scenes, concerned with contemporary socio-political problems.<sup>25</sup> A *Szopka* performance usually takes place in a portable cabinet (wardrobe) with three levels – the first representing heaven, the second representing earth, and the third representing hell – two of which are used for performing ‘sacral scenes’ (upper level) and ‘profane interludes’ (lowest level).<sup>26</sup>

This form of popular theatre, as well as related subsequent forms of Ukrainian popular portable puppet theatre *Vertep* or Belarusian folk puppet theatre *Batleyka*, became popular again in the early twentieth century when modernist directors appropriated traditional popular theatre forms and recycled them in experimental performances.<sup>27</sup> In the *Šėpa* theatre of Gintaras Varnas, popular puppet theatre was also important as a method of renewing the artistic language because the aesthetics of the historical form (the division of the performing space into different sections, a combination of puppets and performers, a more or less improvised text) became the source of inspiration for the artists and provoked new possible ways of stage production. Varnas was particularly interested in a “combination of the tradition and the present” made possible by the *Šėpa* theatre: a combination that is of a “very old theatrical form” and “newspaper materials”, “medieval aesthetics” and “impudent, almost tasteless content.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Lewitter 1950, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Jurkowski and Francis 1996, 298.

<sup>27</sup> More on *Szopka* and *Vertep* see: McCormik and Pratasik 1998.

<sup>28</sup> Šabasevičius 2009, 25.

Both productions of the Šėpa theatre, *Lullabies of Revolution* and *Communist Nostalgias*, used the two-storied *Szopka* cabinet to inhabit it with prominent characters of contemporary Lithuania, the “saints” and “sinners” of the state fighting for its independence. As theatre critics pointed out, the effect and the ridicule of Šėpa theatre was based on recognizable characters, namely public figures, keeping their names, way of behaving, and speaking the way they did in the public political sphere in real life.<sup>29</sup> With the ‘saints’ – the representatives of Moscow and the Kremlin from Joseph Stalin to Mikhail Gorbachev settled in heaven and the ‘sinners’, namely the political figures of Lithuanian ‘Sajūdis’ movement and members of the government of independent Lithuania correspondingly placed in hell, Šėpa theatre through parody, irony, and political satire was a visualization of a ‘Concise Course on Lithuanian History’. Despite the fact that the plays were not performed in official theatrical venues, but in the building of the Theatre Union in Vilnius, and there was no public advertising, they were, nevertheless, extremely popular among the audience, attracting large crowds. As director Varnas puts it, it was enough just to stick a leaflet on the door of the Theatre Union building with a hand written note about the performance that will take place tomorrow, and the next day the house would be full.<sup>30</sup> Theatre critics drew witty pictures of the crowded house in which people were “sitting, standing, but also lying (in front of the stage), climbing (on tables and walls) and hanging (on those who were sitting, standing or lying).”<sup>31</sup> It seems that the genre of political satire in the form of popular puppet theatre was one of the most unique and relevant artistic phenomena of this historical period.

The Šėpa theatre most certainly belongs to the tradition of popular performance defined as progressive, socially and politically engaged theatre. Theatre researchers point out that since the Ancient Greeks, popular performance subverted social norms and made it “possible for performers to satirize the all-powerful religious and political leaders of the day.”<sup>32</sup> Consequently, the term

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<sup>29</sup> Oginskaitė 1990, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Šabasevičius 2009, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Oginskaitė 1989, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Prendergast and Saxton 2009, 51.

‘popular theatre’ is still often used as a synonym for “democratic, proletarian and politically progressive theatre.”<sup>33</sup> Although the degree of radicalism and progressivism of popular theatre has varied depending on the historical socio-political situation, in this kind of theatre “there has always been the question of risk and boundaries.”<sup>34</sup> It is especially true when speaking of puppet theatre as it takes a marginal position in the field of theatrical practices (according to Peter Schumann puppet theatre “has been illegitimate more often than not”<sup>35</sup>), and therefore can afford to speak more openly than the traditional dramatic theatre. Moreover, the transgression of boundaries and risk has often been the major creative drive of the popular theatre, of which the *Šėpa* theatre is a good example. In the course of a few years after gaining a somewhat scandalous prestige, *Šėpa* theatre, according to director Varnas “died its own death”<sup>36</sup> after the socio-political situation changed, i. e. as the driving force of the *Šėpa* theatre, namely the risk and danger to speak on political issues was gone, so was the theatre itself – gone into history and the museum.

### CONTEMPORARY URBAN MYSTERY: EXAMPLE OF *MIRAKLIS*

Another significant example of the appropriation of historical theatre forms was the no less popular environmental theatre *Miraklis*, operating in Vilnius since 1995 to 2004. In this theatre, established by a stage designer and artist Vega Vaičiūnaitė, there were no professional performers (who traditionally form a backbone of any significant theatre company), no professional stage directors, and they also seldom used a dramatic text (and when they did, they would do it “heretically”<sup>37</sup>, according to theatre critics). The impressive visual-musical street performances of *Miraklis* were produced by a group of professional and non-professional artists from different areas as well as non-artists: the process of performance production included different artists, their families, laymen, children etc. The most important criteria for the performers was “do not be late and do

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<sup>33</sup> Schechter 2003, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Prendergast and Saxton 2009, 51.

<sup>35</sup> As cited in Schechter 2003, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Šabasevičius 2009, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Jauniškis 1997, 30.

not act.”<sup>38</sup> The theatre performed in non-theatrical open urban spaces (such as the backyards of Vilnius old city, the riverside of Vilnelė, the abandoned buildings, churches, streets, and squares of the city) and thus attracted wide interest from the public that usually ignores theatre. Moreover, *Miraklis* became the first site-specific and environmental theatre in Lithuania, and one of the first companies promoting community involvement, participation, and collaboration between artists and community members.<sup>39</sup>

After studying stage design and accomplishing a number of successful design projects in various institutional theatres, Vega Vaičiūnaitė decided to leave the official mainstream theatre as, according to the artist herself, it was too attached to the dramatic text and psychological method of acting.<sup>40</sup> From its very first production, *Pro Memoria Saint Stephen's Street No 7 (Pro Memoria Šv. Stepono 7, 1995)* performed in the abandoned backyard of Vilnius old city, *Miraklis* offered a possibility of a different theatrical model: a theatre that rejects the dramatic text, rather choosing to speak through images and sounds, offering the audience a non-traditional way of communication. By combining gigantic puppets, elements of shadow theatre, performers, live music, and pyrotechnics, Vaičiūnaitė produced something of a ‘musical spectacle’/‘musical event’ (in her own words<sup>41</sup>), a multidimensional audio-visual narrative, stylistically close to the popular forms of medieval street performance. In reaction to the critics describing *Miraklis* as an example of innovative and alternative theatre, Vaičiūnaitė claimed that “what we are doing is rather a ‘traditional theatre’ as the forms such as shadow play, mystery, or miracle performance are “old but forgotten things”: “we just carry on these traditions.”<sup>42</sup>

The name of the company *Miraklis* (Eng. *Miracle*) is a direct reference to the popular medieval genre of the liturgical miracle play and by choosing it, Vaičiūnaitė pointed out her idea to produce contemporary urban mystery-perfor-

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<sup>38</sup> Merkevičiūtė 2013, 133.

<sup>39</sup> On *Miraklis* as site-specific, environmental theatre, see Mažeikienė 2010, 88-93.

<sup>40</sup> “Kiekvienas spektaklis - kaip stebuklas,” 1.

<sup>41</sup> Gasparavičius 2000, 61-63.

<sup>42</sup> “Kas yra alternatyvus teatras?,” 9.

mances, played for free in the open spaces of the city, attracting people of different generations and social strata.<sup>43</sup> Therefore *Miraklis* could be compared to such street theatre companies (from e.g. spectacular *Welfare State International* to innovative *Royal de Luxe*), that perceive street performance as a theatre, reaching a wider, more diverse, non-theatre going audience, relying on the highly visual/musical style of the medieval out-door performance. In the manner of medieval carnivals and pageant traditions, the performers of *Miraklis* would often appear in the city streets before the performance itself and “accompanied with live music of trumpets and drums and holding the puppets above their heads would march through the streets as if taking the audience together.”<sup>44</sup> Although the content of the productions of *Miraklis* was not restrained by the canons of medieval religious drama, the forms of theatrical language and communication with the spectator had a lot in common with the theatrical culture of the Middle Ages, according to theatre critics.<sup>45</sup> In *Miraklis*' productions, a kind of thick visuality, reminiscent of miracles and mystery plays where the audio-visual action is developed simultaneously in different places and on different spatial levels, resulted in a ‘surround effect’ that had an immediate and sensual impact on the spectator.<sup>46</sup>

The case of *Miraklis* points out that the adaptation of the traditions of the popular out-door performance enables contemporary theatre artists to address a broad, non-theatrical audience, while its qualities, such as immediacy and community-based energy, offer a contemporary audience a new communicative experience, integrating social, festive, and religious functions of contemporary urban theatre.

## FINAL REMARKS

Turning back now to the initial question of this article – why the historical forms and/or techniques of popular theatre often appear to be the source of creative

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<sup>43</sup> Merkevičiūtė 2013, 93.

<sup>44</sup> Gasparavičius 2000, 71.

<sup>45</sup> di Blasi 1998, 7.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

renovation and artistic inspiration for contemporary theatre – it is possible to sum up that the major reasons are founded in certain qualities of the historical popular theatre, including its disengagement from the pre-written dramatic text and its ability to create a close relationship of direct engagement with the audience. While in the early twentieth century the adherents of theatre reform were mostly intrigued by the non-literary character and theatricality of popular theatre, the theatre producers of the late twentieth century saw it as a possibility to find new ways to communicate to a broader audience, especially to the parts of society that did not visit traditional theatres. In the field of contemporary theatre, adaptation or re-cycling of historical genres and forms construct an important creative strategy. The analysis of examples of post-Soviet Lithuanian theatre demonstrates that the historical forms of popular theatre are not treated as an unquestionable museum relic, but rather as a means to create a live and immediate contact with a contemporary audience through universal historical forms.

The two Lithuanian post-Soviet theatre companies – both short-lived and yet still significant and original – *Šėpa* and *Miraklis* – discovered and developed forms of original artistic language and new ways of theatrical communication by leaning on the historical traditions of popular theatre. In the context of late twentieth century Lithuanian theatre, both companies were notable not only for their non-traditional theatrical poetics, but also for their ability to call back audiences that had rejected institutional, traditional drama theatres, and even those who were ignorant about theatre in general (performances of *Miraklis*, for example, played in open city spaces and would therefore inevitably attract the attention of casual bypassers). The founders of both *Šėpa* and *Miraklis* were not aiming at the reconstruction of historical theatre forms referred to by the chosen titles. Both Varnas and Vaičiūnaitė (like the twentieth century theatre modernists) saw the tradition of popular theatre primarily as a way to renew the theatrical language. Although the content of the productions of both theatres was, in a way, related to historical genres (*Šėpa* used political satire and social criticism characteristic of *Szopka* plays; the urban rituals of *Miraklis* used symbolical im-



agery to represent faith and fundamental truths), they nonetheless tried to construct theatrical narratives that were relevant to the public of the period. The examples of both companies serve as a proof that in spite of the conventional genre restrictions, the forms of popular theatre “lend themselves to adaptation, reinterpretation, and change of content,”<sup>47</sup> while the improvisational nature of popular theatre, its emphasis on direct communication, enables it to appeal to broad audiences.

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<sup>47</sup> Schechter, op. cit., p. 10.

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