

Performance as Counter-memory: Latvian Theatre Makers' Reflections on National History

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ABSTRACT

The article introduces the topic of Latvian documentary theatre of the second decade of the twenty-first century using Michael Foucault's concept of counter-memory. The article analyses a series of performances by artists of the Latvian post-Soviet and post-memory generation dealing with history and memory discourses and highlights the main strategies of use of counter-memory discourses in the creation of national, cultural, and individual identities; emphasizing memory as a construct and highlighting strategies of its creation and maintenance; emphasizing the oppressive nature of dominant-discourses; a disassociation with the past and memory, both cultural and individual.

KEYWORDS

counter-memory, post-memory, discourse, counter-discourse, post-Soviet, performance, documentary theatre, identity

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Memory has been one of the most important subject matters in Latvian theatre since the regaining of national independence in 1991. Previously, history, especially that of the Second World War, its causes, and consequences, was often discussed in theatre, but in correspondence with Soviet ideology, and, consequently, often in contradiction to the memories of Latvians who, as a nation after the war, found themselves under Soviet occupation. The first decade of independence, therefore, was characterized by detailed attention towards discourses of memory previously marginalized, the so-called blank spots of history (events that had been concealed or misrepresented during the Soviet era), particularly Soviet repressions, mass deportations, as well as experiences of the exile communities formed abroad by the refugees of the war. The main source of historical knowledge became testimonials of oral history, not in the least because, for a time, there was a significant lack of historical research uncompromised by the specific frames of Soviet propaganda.

This process encompassed a range of channels (e.g., official memory policies, educational curricula, representations in arts and mass media), was geared towards the creation of a new national identity and discourse of history, and was successful – the previously marginalized memories now form the basis of the dominant discourse on national history. With the conclusion of this process, theatre of the early twenty-first century in Latvia lost interest in history and memory as subject matter. Recently however, there has been a renewal of interest in the memory and history of the second half of the twentieth century by the younger generation of Latvian theatre makers, although the discourses they offer are often incompatible with the dominant discourse established by previous generations. In this article, I will attempt to demonstrate what, how, and for what reasons the younger generation remember, how the discourse generated by contemporary performances relates to the socio-political context of the twenty-first century, as well as explain the performances in the context of counter-memory.

Memory and post-Soviet generation. Contexts

The term 'counter-memory' is applied by Michel Foucault in numerous of his works and defines the process of remembering in a socio-political context. Foucault interprets memory as a discourse, stressing that it is constructed rather than naturally occurring, and thus draws attention to contexts of remembering. Counter-memory, for him, is a form of *resistance against the official discourses of historical continuity, so-called 'regimes of truth', and it is exercised by those who are marginalized by power*. In "History of Sexuality", Foucault writes: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." (Foucault 1990, 95.)

It is important to stress that Foucault's understanding of counter-memory is closely linked with his understanding of counter-culture. For Foucault, counter-culture and mainstream are not mutually exclusive, but rather a dichotomy of categories. While mainstream culture can sustain itself, counter-culture is only viable if the mainstream exists since it is formed by negation. The same traits can be attributed to counter-memory – it does not form without the dominant discourses of memory and is consequently dependent on the established regime of truth that it opposes by promoting marginalized, diverse memories that cannot be easily integrated in the dominant discourse.

Of importance too is the dynamic of the power relations of the memory process. As with any discursive practice, the dominant discourse of memory for Foucault typically forms a 'top-down' perspective. The dominant discourse is suppressive and tends to subject all. Counter-memory, however, highlights the reversed perspective of 'bottom-up', representing the process during which different groups and individuals try to influence the existing knowledge and struggle for a recognition of marginalized discourses of the past. Thus, counter-memory serves as an act of democratization and pluralization and remembering for Foucault is a political act since it aims at influencing the existing power relations.

In this context, I would also like to refer to Foucault's essay on authorship "What is an Author?" The premise of this article dictates that I speak of a certain group of theatre makers as of a generation, and Foucault's understanding of the relationship between an author and a text allows me to categorize a diverse group of individuals, setting aside their individual traits, while concentrating on the common strategies of creating discourses as well as the common contexts that inform them. For Foucault, authorship "points to existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse within a society and culture". (Foucault 1977, 123.) The author, for Foucault, is situated in the breach between the social and the fictional, and Foucault explains in detail how this position dictates the plurality of the author's ego – there exists at the same time a unique individual who has succeeded in creating a certain piece; an author that has fulfilled a set of objectives and used a set of techniques that could be duplicated to arrive at the same conclusion by anyone; an author who has certain goals. Therefore, Foucault concludes, the author does not refer simply to an actual individual, but highlights the mechanisms of discursive

practice, and proposes a list of questions to be considered when discussing authorship, including, where do the discourses come from, how are they circulated and controlled.

The generation discussed in this article operates in the context of post-dramatic, post-Soviet, and post-memory situations. Born in the 1980's, this group of theatre makers is *de facto* the first post-Soviet generation in Latvia: although born in the Soviet Union, they are educated in independent Latvia, do not possess personal memories of the traumatic events of the second half of the twentieth century (e.g., war, deportations, struggle under an occupying power etc.), including knowledge of Soviet discourses of history, but are recipients of discourses of cultural and social memory of independent Latvia. The dominant discourse of history for them, therefore, is that of the institutionalized memory at the turn of the century.

They are also a post-memory generation, a description that in this article is understood in accordance with Marianne Hirsch's work. In her seminal work "The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust", Hirsch writes that "postmemorial work strives to reactivate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. In these ways, less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory that can persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone." (Hirsch 2012, 633.) I have also stayed in line with Hirsch's elaboration on post-memory's connection with cultural memory (institutionalized memory by means of ritual, commemoration, or performance, as defined by Jan Assmann) and Aleida Assmann's characterization of political memory as an integral part of cultural memory.

In this context, a post-colonial perspective is also important, since the dominant discourse on the history of the national state of Latvia was formed in specific historical circumstances. The nation regained its independence in 1991 and had survived a period of occupation not only by a foreign power, but by a regime whose goal was to eradicate previous political, social, and aesthetical practices of the society and replace them completely. This process was traumatic for Latvian society. Benedikts Kalnačs, who discusses the dominant discourse of Baltic drama at the end of the twentieth-century in this context, therefore uses a post-colonial critique and summarizes the discourse as a) stressing a causal link between individual suffering and power; b) foregrounding national culture and identity; c) articulating a strong dichotomy of 'home' / 'alienation'. (Kalnačs 2011, 122)

The discourse characterized above is a discourse of national history created during the third national awakening.¹ It was originally a counter-memory

1 According to tradition, periodization of Latvian national history includes three "national awakenings". The first corresponds to the sixties and seventies of the nineteenth century – the formation of the Latvian nation as an ethnic, cultural, and social entity. The second awakening metaphorically alludes to 1918 and the creation of the independent national state. "The third awakening" is used as a term to describe popular cultural, social, and political movements whose

discourse in the context of the Soviet Union, and was turned into the dominant discourse with the regaining of independence, and taught in schools, promoted in the press, the arts, etc. However, parallel to this discourse, influential alternative accounts of history also exist (particularly, Soviet discourses promoted by neighbouring Russia; to a lesser extent, Western European interpretations of Soviet history, discourses on the Holocaust, etc.), and it is important to take their irreconcilable differences into account as a context that greatly influences the current generation.

The creation of the dominant discourse of history in Latvia was geared towards reestablishing the severed ties with pre-war Latvia, and thus inevitably failing to encompass a large group of Russian-speaking people that had come to Latvia during Soviet times.²

One of the most important differences between both discourses is the interpretation of the Second World War. For the Russian-speaking minority, the Soviet discourse is viable – the war is seen as a breach of a socio-political norm of pre-war society that is corrected by the victory over Nazi Germany. Consequently, in this reading, the Soviet troops are heroes; the Nazis are the villains; but most importantly, so are all resisting Soviet rule (national partisans, political activists, exile communities, etc.) since they are disturbing the re-established normality. The dominant Latvian discourse, however, interprets the

activities in the late eighties of the twentieth century contributed to regaining national independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

2 It should be stressed that the Soviet context is of great importance here. The statistics allow me to demonstrate how the ethnic composition has affected the political and cultural composition of Latvian society. Pre-war Latvia was also a multi-ethnic state and had a considerable, but well integrated Russian minority – the official census of the 1920s and 1930s registers about 10% of the inhabitants of Latvia as ethnic Russians. Ethnic Latvians at the time make up about 80% of the population. During the Second World War and the first decade of Sovietisation, the Latvian majority was reduced considerably due to casualties at war, mass emigration of refugees to the West, and mass deportations carried out by the Soviets. The Soviet government also imposed mass migrations of industrial workers to Latvia from other regions of the Soviet Union. Consequently, the ethnic composition of Latvia was changed significantly. In 2018, 62% of the population of Latvia are listed as Latvians, while Russians are currently 25% of the population. The differences in numbers between both ethnicities are less considerable in cities, since towns and countryside are predominantly Latvian – most regions have 70 to 90% of Latvian inhabitants. This means that, for example, in the capital city of Riga Latvians are currently a minority – in 2018 only 47% of the inhabitants are Latvian. (See: Centrālā Statistika pārvalde 2018.)

In practical terms, the minority is even larger. This article uses the term “Russian-speaking” instead of “Russian”, because a considerable portion of people of other ethnicities that relocated to Latvia during the Soviet period currently identify culturally and politically with the Russian minority, not with the Latvian majority. Self-identifying as economic migrants, they are perceived by most Latvians as the colonizing force of the Soviet regime and labelled politically untrustworthy. This has affected the citizenship laws, forcing Soviet migrants and their descendants to formally apply for Latvian citizenship and pass a citizenship test, while ethnic Latvians received their citizenships automatically. This has led to the situation where currently in Latvia 11% of the population do not hold any citizenship at all and are formally referred to as non-citizens of Latvia. This group consists exclusively of minority people and has a significant influence on the cultural and political standing of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia as a whole. (See: Centrālās Statistika pārvalde 2018, 25-26.)

loss of independence as the breach of the norm. Therefore, the Soviet victory is seen as the prolonged continuation of the breach, begun at the beginning of the Second World War with the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940 and overcome only in 1991 with the regaining of independence. Consequently, the Soviets and the Nazis are villains alike, but the people opposing the Soviets are perceived as national heroes. As demonstrated by recent surveys (e.g., see: Kaprāns 2017) the differences between how the Latvian- and Russian-speaking communities remember the war and its consequences are vast. For example, 83% of Latvians believe that the mass deportations were unjustified (by comparison with 49% of Russian-speakers). Almost 80% of Latvian respondents identify the Latvian soldiers fighting for Nazi Germany as predominantly victims (by comparison with less than 50% of Russian-speakers). There are also significant differences between how different age groups perceive historic events. For example, when asked how they evaluated the Soviet era in the history of Latvia, almost 50% of the respondents aged 18-24 characterized it as bad, while in the age group 55-74 more than 60% had a positive response towards the Soviet era.

This is the context of which theatre makers dealing with the subject matter of national history are acutely aware and take into consideration when constructing their pieces. Starting from 2011 there have been more than a dozen performances by the post-memory generation dealing with the subject matter of memory and history, a significant amount considering that the theatrical environment of Latvia is a small one. Of significance is also the fact that almost all of the directors of this generation actively working have staged at least one performance dedicated to the matter. Although aesthetically and technically very different, the performances are characterized by similar traits. The most important (and in the context of Latvian culture - novel) is the refusal to remain within the limits of one's own ethnic memory discourse, highlighting rival ones. Another trait significant in the context of the representation of memory is refusal to interpret individual memories in the context of grand narratives of history. The last trait to mention is the potential of interaction built into the performances by design. The performances play with the expectations of their audiences as to how history should be represented, and between them clearly demonstrate that memory is understood as a tool of expressing one's political standing in contemporary Latvia, and as a practice of counter-memory. In the following section, I will examine three tactics of using counter-memory discourses in the performances by young Latvian theatre makers.

Remembering *against the grain*: construction of memory

The first tactic I would like to mention – highlighting the constructed nature of memory, as well as drawing an audience's attention to emotional and sometimes irrational strategies used to maintain cultural memory - is characterized by the performance of *The Legionnaires* by director Valters Sīlis staged in Ģertrūdes ielas teātris in 2011. The performance deals with a nationally well-known historical event. At the end of the Second World War, a few hundred Latvian soldiers drafted into the Nazi army fled to Sweden

where they asked for political asylum. The Soviet Union pressured Sweden to extradite the men, which the Swedes did in 1946 despite the understanding that the troops in question were not war criminals and that they would face unlawful prosecutions in the USSR. In Latvia, the historical event is perceived in accordance with the national discourse explained above – the soldiers are seen either as heroes defending their country against the Soviets or as victims since they were illegally drafted and couldn't avoid fighting for the Nazis. The extradition is perceived as an act of betrayal and is also, at times, tied in with the discourses of contemporary international politics in the region as an example of the inefficiency of international pacts and laws. Sīlis constructs the piece opposing three strategies existent in the dominant discourse: he adopts an international perspective, refuses to interpret the legionnaires within the frame of grand history, and chooses differing source material.

The piece does not use any oral history testimonies as was customary at the time in Latvian theatre, but documents from the archives of the Museum of Occupation of Latvia, as well as a novel by the Swedish author Per Olav Enquist, and it consists of a reading of the documents and a fictionalized, very subjective interpretation of the subject in equal parts. The expressed goal of Sīlis' work is to make history come alive, emotionally accessible to contemporary people, although the legionnaires themselves in the performance are robbed of their voice and are only seen and interpreted by outsiders – politicians, contemporaries, artists telling their story.

It is interesting to note that the performance was inspired by the most important rendering of national history in Latvian theatre by a director of a previous generation – Alvis Hermanis' *The Grandfather* staged in 2009. *The Grandfather*, consisting of three stories of veterans of the Second World War (a Soviet, a Nazi soldier, and one that was drafted into both armies) was based on interviews of oral history and clearly demonstrated a tactic of using oral history sources for the construction of the hegemonic discourse on national history. On closer inspection, the seemingly mutually exclusive narratives (for how could a Nazi and a Soviet both be right?) turn out to be structurally identical. The men have almost identical experiences and motivations, regardless of their ideological convictions, and they are all portrayed as not so innocent, yet, never the less, victims in the grand clash of superpowers where individuals are reduced to the role of a puppet, and therefore are not accountable for their actions. The fact that Hermanis had found an ingenious way of consolidating a disrupted national identity did not escape his audience, and without a doubt *The Grandfather* has been very influential in establishing a new, coherent, and all inclusive discourse on national history.

It is therefore of importance that Sīlis positions himself in opposition to *The Grandfather*. According to Sīlis, he first devised *The Legionnaires* because he thought that Hermanis got his history wrong – in Hermanis' piece, the legionnaire interviewed turns out to be a life-long Nazi sympathizer and Sīlis could not subscribe to this representation of a national hero, since his personal convictions were in line with the previously dominant discourse of national history. (Sīlis 2014.) However, in his work, we can also identify a certain aspect

of distrust towards the discursive practices of memory all together. He often questions the discourses of memory, especially in the cases where it paints too nice a picture, allowing the one who is remembering to put oneself in a heightened position – that of an innocent victim or dissident, for example, – and thus history and memory for Sīlis acquire a less hegemonic nature. Sīlis does not aim for “the historic truth” as a definite entity. He is not interested in the reconciliation of mutually exclusive experiences, but rather questions the relationship between memory and the present.

The Legionnaires is performed by a Latvian actor, Kārlis Krūmiņš, and a Swedish-born Finnish actor and director, Carl Alm, who periodically switch from roles to semi-autobiographical stage personas to comment on the material. For example, Alm, to Krūmiņš’ dismay, insists more than once that legionnaires were war criminals and Latvians are self-righteous to defend them. Krūmiņš generally defends legionnaires as national heroes, until at one point he puts on a mask resembling one of the most important figures of the first national awakening, Krišjānis Barons. Barons is the founder of Latvian folklore studies that in his time became a cornerstone for an early national self awareness and national identity, and so when he mockingly starts to sing a made-up folksong about killing the Jews, the act has a shock value, as well as questions whether the show’s insistence that the legionnaires were only fighting for national ideals or survival, is as innocent as the audience would like it to be. Both actors at some point embody Swedish and Soviet officials trying to outsmart each other in a political game or imagine how the soldiers, awaiting the decision of the Swedish government, felt and behaved.

It is important to stress that the legionnaires in the show are purposefully de-heroized. Although in the national discourse they are usually represented as seasoned men with strong patriotic inclinations, Sīlis stresses the reality of teenagers brought up in war time and drafted by force. The legionnaires in the performance are in their early twenties, and behave accordingly – they swear, they drink, and masturbate on stage. They are more interested in the practicalities of their everyday life than on reflecting on the historical or ideological meaning of their surroundings. It is less important for them to understand the intricacies of post-war international diplomacy than to find out who has fathered their pregnant girlfriend’s child. In depicting the legionnaires, the performance is careful to present only actions without ever ascribing them any value or meaning. However, that does not mean that the audience members do not attribute certain meanings to the events shown.

One of the themes of the performance is the inability to understand each other. During the show the actors speak in five languages – Latvian, German, Russian, Swedish, English – therefore, at any show, audience members, regardless of their background, do not understand at least part of the text. The legionnaires themselves are displaced. Furthermore, the inability to understand each other in a contemporary European context is also present in the different personas of the actors. Representing different perspectives on history, they can never agree with each other. The performance is subtitled ‘a discussion with a fight’, and when discussion fails, both actors stage a fight

trying to convince each other by physical force. That fails as well, and the show ends with them both covered in blood sitting on the edge of the stage without the issue of their disagreement having been resolved.

However, the performance itself is not about the legionnaires – who they were, how to interpret their historical role –, since Sīlis is aware that the Latvian audience already arrives at the show with set beliefs and depends on that. Remembering *against the grain* – the story expected by the audience – is used to draw the audience's attention to their behavior in constructing memory.

The audience is actively involved in creating the story of *The Legionnaires*. The actors constantly ask them whether they can imagine something. "Can you imagine that you are a soldier seeking asylum in a country that was formerly your ally? Can you imagine that you are a representative in the Swedish parliament voting for or against extradition?" etc. The questions are constructed in a way that highlight mutually exclusive perspectives on the matter. However, the audience members are also pressured to arrive at a definite interpretation, for example, when they are asked to cast a vote for or against extradition. This means that at least part of the information given by the show must be discarded, and audience members are made aware of the process of choices. In this way the mechanisms of creating a discourse are highlighted (e.g., whether historic accuracy or patriotic value is of more importance, what kind of argumentation works best – rational or emotional, what sources do the audience trust and what are they likely to discard, etc.), and the context of the present, as opposed to the context of the past, is also stressed.

According to Sīlis, in Latvia, audiences always vote against extradition, and it is an emotional highlight of cathartic magnitude: it feels almost like the wrongs of history being corrected. At that point, Alm faces the public and ironically asks them: "So, you want to change history?" The question stresses the emotional background of helplessness: the legionnaires, although it is their story, historically could not influence anything. However, even more importantly, neither can the audience members in the theatre, nor the theatre makers themselves, should they choose to – the past is uncorrectable. The emotional letdown at the end of the show is complex. The audience is disappointed with the history, but even more so – with the present, because throughout the show, the contemporality of the events depicted has been stressed, e.g., by showing the legionnaires in situations that may well be of the twenty-first century, by alluding to the similarities of the political contexts of post-war and contemporary societies etc. The dominant discourse, therefore, is presented in a hyperemotional way, but also demonstrates its superficiality, constructive nature, and its failure to dominate in a context larger than a singular ethnic memory group.

The good Russian: identity in the context of oppressive memory

The awareness of the dominant discourse as merely one of many is characteristic to all the works by the generation, even though they often use the contrasting discourses for different reasons. Sīlis uses the counter-

discourse to test the dominant discourse and for him, the inability of the latter to dominate the reading of history has negative connotations and is seen as the somewhat tragic vulnerability of the national identity; for others it serves to highlight the oppressive nature of the dominant discourse and the socio-political consequences of that.

The range of use of counter-memory discourses in this way is significant. For example, counter-memory is used to highlight the ethnic tensions of contemporary Latvia by problematizing the position of Latvians, now a majority that is still traumatized by having been a minority, in relation to contemporary ethnic minorities.

In 2015 director Dmitry Petrenko premiered *The Last Pioneer* in Dirty Deal Teatro, a show that was devised using oral history interviews of Russian teenagers coming of age during the collapse of the Soviet Union, the last ones to join the nearly mandatory ideological Soviet teenager's movement - the pioneers. In stark contrast with the dominant discourse on the third national awakening that depicts the end of the eighties of the twentieth century as a golden age of unity in Latvia, the counter-memory discourse of the Soviet teens shows characters that feel helpless, believe that their future has been stolen (e.g., with the closing of the national borders they are no longer eligible to study in Russian universities and therefore are forced to alter their career preferences), and feel lost.

To represent the characters' inability to understand what is happening in newly independent Latvia, the show uses language. People interviewed for the show recall that in the early 1990s they were brought up in Latvia, but in the Soviet Russian context, did not speak Latvian at all, and suddenly they were confronted with a new social, political, and cultural situation. The absurdity of the changes as seen by Russian teenagers is highlighted on the stage by a poster that spells out "Pūt, vējiņi!" (loosely translated as "Blow, little wind!" in English) in Cyrillic. The cultural significance for the Latvian audience is obvious – it's the title of a popular Latvian folk song that gained heightened cultural status during the Soviet occupation; while many Latvian songs, including, but not limited to the national anthem, were banned and their performance criminalized as an act of treason, *Pūt, vējiņi!* was among the repertoire that could be performed despite not being ideological or popular in nature. The teacher of the Latvian language uses this song and only this song in a class that does not speak the language, does not understand the text, or the cultural significance of it, and yet she blames the students for their inability to communicate in Latvian. The students in their turn conclude that Latvianness is something foreign and forced upon them. To highlight their discomfort, the actors switch to speaking Russian for a few scenes, even though the piece is performed in an independent theatre catering to predominantly young Latvians that, due to a longstanding Latvian educational policy actively discouraging Latvian schoolchildren from learning Russian as a foreign language, are in most cases unable to communicate in Russian. The actors, Latvians in their twenties, also do not know Russian – they have mechanically learned to pronounce the text that they do not understand. Here, language acts as a

multi-layered metaphor, and the distinction between pretending to speak and speaking signifies also processes of identification and integration.

It is an effective strategy to make the audience feel the discomfort the characters of the piece are experiencing. The language ties the discourse presented to a specific contemporary context since the question of whether the Russian language should be banned in Russian minority schools has been on the political agenda for more than a decade. The controversy is obviously tied to the question of identity – the Russian minority feels that by banning the Russian language from schools, the state of Latvia is aggressively suppressing their cultural identity; Latvians fear that strengthening the identity of a large minority will lead to a second official language of the state and endanger Latvian identity. Both positions have far reaching political consequences and contribute to the maintenance of society as a construct consisting of two isolated communities.

The specific use of the Russian language in the show also highlights the question of the relationship between the minority and an oppressive dominant culture. The show alludes to the Latvian national history – periods during the nineteenth century tsarist Russia, the Nazi and the Soviet occupations in the twentieth century when Latvian was banned from use in bureaucratic, legal, and educational contexts. Thus, the show indirectly poses an inconvenient question of the similarities between the situation of the past and of the present that are reflected in the dominant discourse in a contrary manner. What changes when a minority becomes a majority? Do all minorities have inherit rights to fight for their identity? How does the Latvian and Russian marginalization differ?

The show also poses a question of what the ideal behaviour of a member of the Russian minority in the eyes of the Latvian majority would look like. The director – a Latvian Russian who actively works in the field of Latvian culture – presents an image that he himself has ironically dubbed “the good Russian” (Rozentāls 2013): that is somebody who not only is a loyal citizen, speaks Latvian, contributes to society, but also someone who has effectively ceased to be Russian. The irony here is inescapable, and Petrenko’s work exudes a considerable amount of Soviet nostalgia. In this case the longing is not for a place to return to, for a political regime, but rather for a time when one’s identity was unchallenged, whole. It is clear that the memory presented in the show is nurtured and maintained as a direct reaction to the dominant discourses of memory that fail to reflect sufficiently on the experiences of a minority.

As this is the strategy that is used the most by this generation of artists, I will mention a few more examples to highlight the range of memories marginalized or, as felt by the artists, misrepresented by the dominant discourse. In all the cases, as in *The Last Pioneer*, at the centre is the question of identity, and the productions often return to the memory discourses most unacceptable to the dominant discourse – those closely resembling the Soviet discourse on history.

For example, *The Father – Hero '69* written by Inga Gaile, directed by Dāvis Auškāps (Dirty Deal Teatro, 2016), tells a story of a Latvian born KGB officer during the sixties. The show is promoted as a study of a family history, the

main character of the play being based on the playwright's grandfather and marketed as a controversial take on national history by admitting Latvian collaboration with the occupying regime. The profession of the main hero is repeatedly referenced throughout the show; however, the audience never witness him in any professional capacity, nor learn anything about his deeds that would, according to the dominant discourse, label him as a borderline criminal. Instead, the play focuses on the troubled relationship between a married couple locked in a spiral of alleged mutual infidelities. The character may not be a pleasant one, but his unpleasantness is due to exaggerated jealousy and an infantile nature that threatens his personal life but does not affect, nor relates to, his public life. If Sīlis in *The Legionnaires* de-heroizes the national heroes, Gaile and Auškāps, on their part, humanize the national villain.

Director Mārtiņš Eihe develops this trend even further in his *Birthday of Tanya* (*Ģertrūdes ielas teātris*, 2016). The text of the performance consists of memories collected in the project *Your memories for the future of Latvia* funded by the Goethe Institute in Riga, inviting people of different ethnic backgrounds to share their family stories of the twentieth century.

The show mimics a family party - approximately a hundred audience members are invited to sit by a communal table set with a selection of appetizers, sweets, wine as traditional in large Latvian family gatherings. The audience is then encouraged to eat and drink, to involve themselves in the small talk with the people next to them, and they are only interrupted by the actors from time to time for a toast, a speech, or a party game. The texts the actors perform vary from anecdotes to nostalgia, to testimonials of deportations, exile, collaboration, etc. The guests are also actively invited to share their stories or to discuss the stories heard. The metaphorical frame of the performance enables the inclusion of any experiences since the nation here is interpreted as a family consisting of vastly diverse, yet equal individuals.

Nevertheless, it is important in the context of the use of counter-culture to stress the dramaturgical structure of the piece. Despite being relatively open to any interactions by the audience members, the piece itself has an arc of conflict written into it. At one point two actors disagree on the reading of history – one expresses a nostalgic longing for the Soviet era, insisting that life was less complicated then; the other promotes the dominant discourse of history, stressing particularly the deportations as a definite argument in proving the evil nature of the Soviet state. Their verbal exchange escalates into a physical fight that ends without any definite conclusion on the issue of how to interpret the Soviet occupation. But the most interesting aspect is the fact that the emotional culmination of the show is the reading of letters of a Soviet soldier who, during the war, corresponds with his pregnant wife back in the Urals. The letters are beautiful and paint a portrait of a gentle, loving man, an image in stark contrast with how the dominant discourse would portray a soldier of the occupying army – as a faceless monstrosity whose only goal is the destruction of Latvian lives.

The authors of *The Last Pioneer*, *The Father – Hero '69* and *The Birthday*

of *Tanya* are informed by very different contexts. Petrenko is a Russian, and although he works predominantly in the context of the Latvian community, his reflection on the subject is naturally influenced by the context of the Russian minority in Latvia. It could be argued that Gaile's take on history is dependent on her personal relationship with the subject, since the history of her family might compromise her status in contemporary Latvia. However, the counter-memory discourse is also used by Eihe who comes from the context of the Latvian majority, is very patriotic, and in the theatre often chooses to stage performances that are closely connected with the national history as seen by the dominant discourse.

What these and other performances by this generation of theatre makers demonstrate is the unease of the artists with the dominant discourse as a failed attempt to encompass a sufficient amount of differing memory discourses existent in contemporary Latvia and the consequential crisis of national identity. Although all are influenced to some extent by the contemporary political theatre scene, especially verbatim and documentary theatre, and one of the main themes of their performances is the problem of representation, none of the artists have defined their theatre as political in nature. However, their work with counter-memory discourses obviously highlights the striving to open dominant memory discourses for re-evaluation. The current dominant discourse, therefore, is often seen in an ironic light, and the very idea of the possibility of succeeding in creating a dominant memory discourse acceptable both to majority and minorities at the same time is never really questioned.

What am I to do with it? An attempt to disassociate from one's memory

In conclusion, I would like to briefly touch upon the third strategy of the use of counter-memory in Latvian contemporary theatre: the dissociation from the past and abandonment of the attempt to reconcile dominant and counter discourses.

In 2015, Russian born Latvian director Vladislav Nastavshev staged his autobiographical performance *The Lake of Hope* in the New Riga theatre, followed by *The Lake of Hope is Frozen* in 2018. The performances deal with the question of the author's identity, especially the first one that introduces the image of remodeling – of Vlad's Soviet-style apartment, of his relationship with his elderly mother, as well as his identity, and it is obvious that the choices Nastavshev as an artist makes are closely influenced by his personal discomfort with discourses of the 'norm' in Latvian society.

Nastavshev is a Russian and a gay man, and both of those identities can be a challenge in Latvia. One of the main objects on the stage in *The Lake of Hope* is a closet, and the performance is literally Nastavshev's coming out, revealing his sexual identity to the public for the first time. However, the closet is filled with all sorts of things Nastavshev feels he could do without but cannot get rid of, starting with his useless repairmen, a neighbour and a potential love interest of Nadezhda (Vlad's mother), but, predominantly, objects that remind Vlad of his Soviet childhood.

The character longs for a cosmopolitan identity and feels humiliated by his

Soviet past. However, the metaphorical space of the stage representing Vlad's inner reality stubbornly fails to allow him to let go of the memories. Even though, in the end, Vlad seemingly succeeds in renovating his apartment (a metaphor for his identity), the "Soviet nature" of it has only been highlighted. Vlad's resistance to live like everybody else (meaning, in the context of the show, to renovate one's apartment in the style of European minimalism) leads him to scrubbing down all the layers of his walls to reveal their true composition. It turns out to be Soviet cement, an imperfect building material that is now exposed much to Vlad's satisfaction. Neither the character, nor the director seem to be aware of the irony of the image.

The title of the play features a wordplay. *Hope* is the translation of Vlad's mother's name, and encompasses Nastavshev's complicated relationship with the past he has inherited and refuses to identify with. *The Lake of Hope is Frozen*, for example, deals with Nastavshev's relationship with his maternal grandmother – the widow of a Soviet officer who is openly against the independence of Latvia; but shortly after introducing the character to the stage, Vlad loses any interest in her – he has nothing to remember about her. However, it turns out that simply by refusing to acknowledge something or someone, they do not disappear. Vlad's grandmother joins different inanimate objects in the background of the stage, but never leaves. Thus Vlad's 'hope' for the future, for a changed living space, is never fulfilled, since there is no space to build something new. Although the character is conscious about his rejection of the dominant discourse of memory, his attempts to adopt some form of counter-memory also fail, and Vlad is left on stage filled with the debris of his memory, feeling isolated and unable to find any meaningful relationships in any group of society. The lake has frozen, and Vlad is also freezing in metaphorical isolation, ironically dressed in the velvet costume of a figure skater that he has outgrown.

It is important to stress that this sort of use of counter-memory is by no means limited to Nastavshev. While the performances described above are a serious attempt to analyze the identity of a complex personality belonging to several minorities in the Latvian context, the same technique is used also by ethnic Latvian artists, predominantly in comedies. Perhaps the most characteristic example here is *The Flea Market of Souls* by playwright Justīne Kļāva and director Inga Tropa (Dirty Deal Teatro, 2017), a comedy about the identities of a group of European exchange students in their twenties. Each of the characters in their turn remember how they have been confronted with their grandparent's tales of glory during the Second World War. The absurdity of the discourses on national histories becomes evident when compared on an international level. A Russian grandson's refusal to buy beetroot, for example, is met by his grandfather's reminder that he liberated Europe from the Nazis. A Polish girl cannot find a sufficient answer when her relatives claim that they fought Russian tanks on horseback. An Austrian guy is forced to be silent altogether as soon as he starts to speak. All the others silence him by either stressing that he has never really suffered because of historical memory or, rather ironically in the context of the previous claim, call him a Nazi, etc. The

only answer any of the characters are able to offer to their predecessors is repeated like a chorus all through the performance: “But what am I to do with it?” They all feel disconnected from the discourses they inherited. However, in interpersonal (and intercultural) relationships they also learn quickly that a memory of someone instantly triggers a counter-memory by someone else, even if privately they are all sceptical of the discourses they have inherited. Thus, the dominant and the counter-discourses feed each other in a constant loop, ensuring the survival of the other in the ever-changing power struggle.

In conclusion, the differing practices concerning representations of counter-memory discourses are rarely positioned as political. However, they are all inherently connected with the question of individual or cultural identity, and are critical of the contemporary socio-political establishment. All of the performances analysed in this article demonstrate the uses of counter-memory as a tool for questioning the dominant discourse rather than promoting marginalized memory discourses in their own right.

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