

Inside Frozen Geographie

Baltic-Russian Theatre Exchanges after 2014

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ABSTRACT

After the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation in 2014, the attitude of Baltic theatre producers and artists towards cultural and institutional partnerships with Russian theatres and their involvement in the mutual artistic exchanges, tours, common projects, and networking changed; not only due to these exchanges becoming a controversial issue in the public eye, but also due to the polarization they caused in the artistic community itself. Some artists, like Latvian stage director Alvis Hermanis, have decisively terminated all their previous creative partnerships, arrangements and tours, calling also other theatre artists “to take sides”. Others, like Russian stage and film director Kirill Serebrennikov who, for years, had been involved with Baltic theatres, would regard taking sides as a disastrous yielding of culture to the logic of war – theatre should be kept as the last link between societies gradually separated by reciprocal propaganda insanity.

Building upon these conflicts describing the changes in intercultural theatrical cooperation between Russian and Baltic theatres, the article focuses on the analysis of three productions: *Dreams of Rainis* by Kirill Serebrennikov at the Latvian National Theatre (2015), Alexander Pushkin’s play *Boris Godunov* directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius at the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre (2015) and *Brodsky/Baryshnikov* staged by Alvis Hermanis at the New Riga Theatre in 2016.

All of the performances refused to stay inside the frameworks marked for them by the regimes of propaganda wars, public diplomacy, or dispositif of security, but focused instead on the possibilities of intellectual disobedience.

KEYWORDS

Russia, Baltic states, theatrical exchanges, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, propaganda wars, international security, Cold War, geopolitics, territory.

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Taking sides

After the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, in the world of the theatre of the Baltic states, attitudes towards Russia certainly came to the forefront. The sympathies of the local artists towards Russian official culture, cooperation with Russian theatre institutions, and even attempts to pursue neutrality and keep a distance became – more than ever before since the 1990s – an object of public debate and critique. The hard power of Russia – a military, economic, and informational aggression towards its neighbouring countries that, not so unexpectedly, came up through the conflict in Ukraine, and the "New Cold War" with the West¹ made Baltic societies and theatre communities quite suspicious as to the possibility of neutral cultural exchanges. Culture resources – great artists, important awards, grants and donations for arts from the government, important positions in large festivals, and state supported theatre institutions, as well as tours, meetings, and other forms of cooperation can be effectively used for co-option and political advertising, constructing positive images of the country (and supporting negative images of its enemies) without coercion when symbolic or ideational properties are employed as "soft power" (to use the term by Joseph Nye), to make behavioural changes in both the domestic and foreign societies.

An example of such a controversy could be the case of the Lithuanian stage director Rimas Tuminas – a major figure in Lithuanian theatre and leader of the Vilnius Small theatre - who took the position of artistic director of the substantially state-funded Moscow Vakhtangov theatre in 2007, and who has received numerous theatrical awards from the government of the Russian Federation, which has since 2014, become an object of fierce polemics, criticism, and contention among the Lithuanian theatrical public.

1 The concept of the New Cold War to name the new era of disturbing confrontations between the Kremlin and the West where the old means to threaten the opposite side, like powerful explosives, chilled steel, and enriched uranium are replaced instead with war strategies based on money, natural resources, diplomacy, and propaganda is suggested mostly by Edward Lucas in his *The New Cold War: How Kremlin Menaces Russia and the West* (Lucas 2008).

The position by Tuminas speaking for the autonomy of culture and its universal call has a number of supporters among Lithuanian theatre artists as well as fierce opponents who perceive it as a kind of open support for the military invasions and aggression of the Russian government against neighbouring states including too, the Baltic states.² For example, in 2015, at the ceremony of the national Lithuanian theatre awards known as the Golden Cross, the American-Lithuanian stage director Yana Ross called into question theatrical tours to Russia as well as other forms of exchange and cooperation pointing out the need for theatre artists to at least find out who was sponsoring these exchanges and cooperations.

Another example was Lithuanian playwright Marius Ivaškevičius who stirred up the theatrical public in June 2015 by publishing a manifesto called “Fear War Heralds”, in which he declared that, as an artist, he could no longer stay neutral and was thus “going off to war” by which he meant a determination toward an active engagement in the propaganda wars.³ The manifesto was also an early introduction to his theatre project realized in cooperation with the Hungarian stage director Árpád Schilling and the Lithuanian National theatre called “The Great Evil” which addressed the war in Ukraine and the shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 by separatists over Eastern Ukraine as well as the aggregation of lies and fabrications around the event.

In this article, I would like to focus on the situation following the chain of events in Ukraine in 2014 when theatre artists, performers, playwrights, producers, heads of theatrical institutions, and theatre audiences were forced to discover themselves as subjects of a geopolitical security apparatus. Some experienced it as a shock, since from that moment the individual creative work and communication became contaminated and controlled by the particular apparatus of security (calculations of probable events, like hybrid, military, and information attacks, economic sanctions and their effects, legal mechanisms, including international agreements, black lists, etc.) Should we somehow fight against this apparatus that tends to capture our subjectivity? Is it possible to just ignore it and proceed with the creative work of cooperations as if the apparatus has not been activated? Is it possible to break through the propaganda dichotomies without, however, denying the artistic activities public relevance?⁴

2 See for example Malinauskas *15min.lt* 22.10.2015.

3 Ivaškevičius *Delfi* 5.6.2015. Or war against Russian propaganda what the writer meant was the use of irony, parody, allegories to fight Russia’s aggression camouflaged in all kinds of reasoning and disinformation. The manifesto was thus similar to the public initiative *DEMASKUOK.LT* which united the media, society, and the state of Lithuania in unmasking the disinformation in the news portals and social networks.

4 The examples of the Baltic-Russian theatre exchanges in this article come from Lithuanian and Latvian theatres and can be considered as key cases of both the controversy of collaborations after 2014 and of theatre productions dealing with the geopolitical situation. Naturally, there have been similar developments in Estonian theatrical culture of the period following 2014. It includes the public position of artists such as Finnish-Estonian writer Sofi Oksanen, as well as artistic initiatives of cooperation and exchange such as Estonian-Russian cooperation in the project based theatre R.A.A.A.M., or under the auspices of the creative space Vaba Lava in the border city Narva. Estonian examples would also need a comprehensive presentation of the context of “memory wars” that is outside the scope of present research (see Onken 2007).

Cultural Exchange in the (New) Cold War

In his article, Russian playwright, director, and performer, Yevgeni Grishkovetz, acknowledges that the propaganda hysteria comes from two sides and that it was equally absurd on the part of Russia to restrict the Latvian stage director Alvis Hermanis to enter Russian territory, where he had been successfully staging performances in different theatres as well as touring around with his New Riga Theatre for years, merely for the reason of his open and severe opinion regarding the annexation of Crimea. "Oh, please," writes Grishkovetz, "Russia needs Hermanis more than Hermanis needs Russia."⁵

Hermanis, on the other hand, contrary to what Grishkovetz suggests, was not some kind of casualty of the annoying information war, but rather a volunteer. Long before becoming *persona non grata* on a Putin black list, Hermanis renounced the planned journeys to Russia by his own will.⁶ In March 2014, Hermanis cancelled the tours of the New Riga Theatre in Russia, performances at the Russian festivals of St. Petersburg and Omsk, and a scheduled production in Bolshoi theatre in protest against the aggression of Russia in Ukraine. Ipso facto the New Riga Theatre also addressed other Latvian stage artists encouraging them to demonstrate their attitudes towards the developments in Ukraine. "The military aggression of Russia against Ukraine resulted in a situation wherein the Latvian citizens have no possibility any more to take a neutral stance" – declared the press release of the theatre.⁷ This release has activated huge discussions on social media among both Latvians and Russians, as well as among Latvian Russians.⁸

While, for Grishkovetz, the only escape from the restricting and crippling political propaganda entrenchments are regular and sane cultural relations and fruitful creative projects developing outside the frenzy of governments, politicians and the media caught up in propaganda witchcraft, Hermanis, as well as several other artists in the Baltic states, follow a different position: they no longer hold to the way of thinking that keeps the two spheres – the public one of politics and the private one of culture and personal life – separated and inconsistent, which is the result of almost three decades of functioning democracy. Culture, as a way to escape the absurd spectacles of "public life" and as an endurable alternative to the sphere of power, government affairs, and international polarizations, is generally perceived as the social pattern from the Soviet past that has been overcome.⁹ Another argument also claimed

5 Гришковец *Новостная лента* 26.12.2015.

6 In fact Hermanis have pointed out his position towards the regime of Vladimir Putin much earlier, in 2012 when he officially dedicated his opera *Soldiers*, staged in Salzburg to the Russian punk group *Pussy Riot*.

7 *Riga New Theatre* webpage, 3.3.2014.

8 s.n. *Delfi.ru* 5.3.2014.

9 The specific relationship of culture to public life in the Soviet system has been analyzed by Alexei Yurchak. Opposing the claim that for Soviet totalitarian society culture was the only public sphere (since the media was controlled by the party and censorship machine) for political discussions among citizens (albeit by using all kinds of allegories and hidden meanings), Yurchak maintains that culture was primarily a way to escape and to exist outside (*vne*) the political sphere (see Yurchak 2005).

that there are threshold events – and military intervention for the annexation of a country's territory is definitely one of them – that cannot fit any more into a pragmatic framework of foreign policy and cultural exchanges, the bandwidth of acceptable cooperations. After all, shouldn't culture be the field in which pragmatics give way to the normative approach?

While the position of Hermanis had supporters, there were theatre artists in Latvia who tended to maintain the position of cultural autonomy instead of digging deep into the opposing trenches of politics. So Ojārs Rubenis, the then director of the Latvian National Theatre, for example, has been actively cooperating with the Russian stage and film director Kirill Serebrennikov (Кирилл Серебренников) for years and, in 2015, at the apex of the propaganda war, invited Serebrennikov to the National Theatre in Riga to direct a play about the Latvian national poet Rainis (pseudonym of Jānis Pliekšāns), the head of the same national theatre of the interwar period and the symbolical figure of Latvian national culture, literature and theatre, in fact the main figure of Latvian modern national culture, whose plays have been staged throughout the twentieth century by all major Latvian directors.

The Latvian National Theatre then, in its own right, was invited to tour to the Gogol Centre in Moscow (as Kirill Serebrennikov was and continues to be the head of this institution) and decided to accept the invitation, in spite of the boycott proposed by Hermanis. This occurred only after a democratic vote of the whole theatre company took place (according to Rubenis one vote against would have been enough to cancel the tour – but the tour was supported by a solid vote). As Serebrennikov himself has commented on this choice: the actors of the Latvian National Theatre decided that after all they are not going to perform for the Kremlin, but for the audiences of the Gogol Centre, for the Moscow theatre public, people that have a position that is by no means chauvinist, but rather anti-military. "Theatre, after all, and culture in general, claims Serebrennikov, should stay as the last bridge allowing people to communicate."¹⁰

The performance *Dreams of Rainis (Rainis sapņus)* was based on the notebooks of Rainis in which the Latvian poet would take notes of his dreams. In cooperation with the dramaturg Ieva Struka, choreographer Evgeny Kulagin, composer Jēkabs Nīmanis, and the actors of the National Theatre company, the director, who was also a set and costume designer, proposed a visual reading of the dream descriptions which resulted in a fresh revisiting of the classical canon. This was celebrated by the Latvian audience as an escape from weary traditional nationalist symbolism. In fact, according to some Latvian reviewers, the invitation to Serebrennikov to come to stage *Dreams of Rainis* at the National Theatre seemed to some extent to be a response to the numerous interpretations of Russian classical drama staged by Latvian directors, like at least two interpretations of Pushkin's *Onegin* by Hermanis and Dž. Dž. Džillingers produced around the same year.¹¹

The intercultural dynamics, the provocative opportunity to leave the local

¹⁰ Худенко *Delfi.lv* 11.1.2016.

¹¹ Jundze *Nra.lv* 5.2.2015.

cultural canon and to look at one's national culture from the global perspective was more important an argument for this production than the political hostility between the EU and Russia. The performance signified a free, witty, and beneficial cultural dialogue refusing to obey the futile geopolitical dichotomies and the whole logic of divides and opposites stretching along the lines of political separations.¹²

The performance thus can be seen as an attempt to negotiate the opposites of: 1) the production (by the director from Russia) and the perception (of the Latvian audience); 2) the text of a national classic and the stage tableaux controlled by a foreign director; 3) institution entrenching national identity and the project involving alien (possibly even hostile?) appropriations of this identity, etc. In this political context, *Dreams of Rainis* had a quality of a backward glance at the Utopia made out of pieces of the aesthetics of the international avant-garde of the early twentieth century that Rainis represented locally (the director chose the intimate surrealist dreamscape of the notebooks instead of the national epics that Rainis is mostly known for in the eyes of Latvian directors) in combination with the optimism of the post-Cold War popular culture of the late twentieth century using images, costumes, and movements that reminded one of a positive nation's performance in the Eurovision Song Contest (see Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. *Dreams of Rainis* (2015, Latvian National Theatre) directed by Kirill Serebrennikov.

¹² For a consideration of these issues see the reviews by Silvija Radzobe *Satori* 2.11.2015 and Valda Čakare *Krodērs.lv* 2.11.2015.

But above all, in *Dreams of Rainis*, culture in the form of dreamscapes of a Latvian poet (as well as in the symmetrical opposite, the volatile romance of Pushkin's *Onegin* in Latvian productions) is treated as the resource that cannot be exhausted or appropriated, like solar energy that accumulates itself in spite of geopolitical statements, limits, surveys, and calculations streaming around and beyond national territories, gas pipelines, and military bases. If this culture does not transcend politics, it circumvents or cuts through it – to use the terms that Zelda Fichandler, the Arena Stage artistic director used after her company visited Moscow and Leningrad in 1973 with the first permanent drama theatre from USA to tour in the USSR: “There are times when you meet another human being on terms that are neither yours nor his – you simply show something you have made and it pleases him. This is when we are at our best. At these times, the optimistic element in life takes over. That conscious tendency to synthesize, harmonize, reconcile, organize the conflict that we find in life is in the ascendancy and we are, for a moment, fully human and most alive. In that moment, what we all too lightly call “cultural exchange“ takes place.”¹³ As a form of international cultural cooperation, *Dreams of Rainis* maintains the same logic that was supported during the (old) Cold War years when culture was seen by the artistic communities on both sides of the capitalist / socialist divide as a way to “synthesize, harmonize and reconcile“ what politics has left shattered, disrupted, and polarized.

Theatre Exchanges as Cultural Diplomacy

Looking at the developments of Russian-Baltic intercultural mobility in theatre and the polemic and at times antagonistic discourse that accompany it, one can distinguish two opposite attitudes that relate to the problematic concept of *cultural diplomacy*. After all, tours, visits, and cooperation between artists and institutions are often regarded as a constitutive part or even an emblem of cultural diplomacy. The opposition between the two standpoints: the one that urges the artists and cultural institutions to choose sides in relation to the geopolitical situation and the second, its counterpart, the understanding of culture as the last possibility to escape the futile geopolitical dichotomies, is built upon a different understanding of cultural diplomacy and its value within the spectrum of related practices such as nation branding, public diplomacy, soft power, propaganda, and reflexive control.¹⁴

This progressively darker sequence (from the politically almost neutral branding or managing international reputation of the country to increase tourism and foreign investment, towards a more ambiguous soft power and eventually to reflexive control coming directly from the grim technologies of the Cold War

13 Richmond, 127.

14 A number of critics of Kremlin politics see Russia's information war, its methods, and strategies as an adaptation of the earlier soviet “reflexive control“ with regard to the contemporary geopolitical context. There is an arsenal of weapons designed to control the way foreign societies perceive certain events (like war) and shape this perception the way one needs through, for example, distortion, mystification, bluff, falsification of events, limiting the accessibility of data or territories, or the so called 4D approach (dismiss, distort, distract, dismay) that have been successfully used during the Cold War (see for example Snegovaya 2015, Vasara 2020).

back to use now) embraces blurred and overlapping concepts to point out the same practice, namely, "political advertising to foreign publics". As opposed to more traditional diplomatic practices, public diplomacy and its darker relatives seek ways to circumvent the diplomats and the official representatives of the authorities of a foreign country and to address directly that country's general public.¹⁵ "Advertising" in this formula extends from the dialogic engagement with the foreign society to the brutal information wars using modern communication technologies, web brigades, troll armies, bots, and skills.

The consensus of Western literature on the subject places cultural diplomacy in opposition to the violence of propaganda. The different practices of cultural diplomacy, such as tours and exchanges, are presented as a possibility to "soften, clarify, complicate" the entrenched policies and to provide expanded opportunities for connection.¹⁶

Cultural diplomacy is supposed to bridge differences, offering an effective solvent of prejudice and disinformation, and generally humanizing geopolitical positions by fostering mutual understanding. By forging meaningful ties outside of official government policies and geopolitical interests of nation-states the practices of cultural diplomacy work as a "neutral platform for people-to-people contact"¹⁷ and a positive agenda of equal and reciprocal cooperation.

However, even within this generally positive appreciation of cultural diplomacy it is admitted that there is also the other end, where cultural diplomacy boards with public diplomacy and becomes its integral part or even a tool in which case culture is used for achieving the goals that the government has in relation to the societies of foreign countries which makes its neutrality compromised. The question in other words is: should cultural diplomacy be understood as "the exchange of aspects of culture among nations to foster mutual understanding"¹⁸ or as a mere practice of governments, "carried out in support of a government's foreign policy goals"¹⁹?

As Joan Channik claims in her article "The artist as cultural diplomat", "there is a fundamental difference between the official approach to cultural diplomacy – where the emphasis is on the diplomacy, and culture is merely a tool or, worse, a weapon – and the approach taken by artists. Artists engage in cross-cultural exchange not to proselytize about their own values but rather to understand different cultural traditions, to find new sources of imaginative inspiration, to discover other methods and ways of working and to exchange ideas with people whose worldviews differ from their own. They want to be influenced rather than influence."²⁰

15 See Berridge and Lloyd 2012. Kishan S. Rana points out that public diplomacy consists of "[activities] through which governments, working with non-state agencies, reach out to public and nonofficial actors abroad, covering inter alia information, culture, education, and the country image. Public diplomacy also includes the activities of the government directed at home publics, concerning foreign affairs and the image of its diplomatic network." (Rana 2011, 77).

16 Goff 2013, 418.

17 Goff 2013, 422.

18 Goff 2013, 420.

19 Goff 2013, 420.

20 Channik *American Theatre* 22:5/2005.

The two positions: the political-instrumentalist and the artistic-inspirational, however, are not always clearly segregated whether they are actively perceived by the artist and the public or not. "Ultimately, cultural diplomacy's position at the intersection of government and cultural world is both a source of strength and challenge" – summarizes Goff,²¹ making thus navigation at the intersection of art and power both at the site of production and at the site of perception complex and uncertain.

What is important at this point is the degree to which an artist (for example an artist on tour) or theatrical institutions looking for cooperation are able to distance themselves from governments and official goals and strategies of public diplomacy. The credibility of an agent of cultural diplomacy is jeopardized if there is a clear affiliation with the governments of his/her own or foreign country, through financing, awards, or any other forms of recognition and patronizing. After Kirill Serebrennikov was arrested in Russia in 2018 this fact gave him new credit among theatre communities in the Baltics.

When Hermanis produced his last performance in Russia, the production called *Stories of Shukshin* (*Рассказы Шукшина*, based on the prose of Vasily Shukshin) in 2014 at the Theatre of Nations in Moscow, Vladimir Putin himself came to see the performance and publicly praised it all over the media (at that moment Hermanis was already *persona non grata*), thus making a kind of upper-hand confirmation and by this act of patronizing obviously drawing the production into the field of public diplomacy of his own government. Hermanis reaction was fierce: he accused Putin in the media (both Latvian and Russian) of being dishonest in trying to make allies out of intellectuals that are already dead and cannot protest. Hermanis claimed that Shukshin himself would have never joined the "lumpen psychodelics" that Putin tries to sell as the renaissance of Russian spirit.²²

It is important to note here that Alvis Hermanis (like Lithuanian Eimuntas Nekrošius), has been deeply attached to Russian culture and has staged a great deal of Russian classical and contemporary drama²³ thus consciously developing cultural dialogue, looking however for ways to escape political and instrumental ties. For them, Russian culture does not correspond to its version approved by Russia's cultural diplomacy as they are trying to navigate their dialogues and cultural exchanges including figures and texts that exist outside the Soviet-Putinist propaganda framework, or that are openly critical towards it as well as in spite of any anti-Russian insinuations within Baltic cultural or societal environments.

In one of his last performances which was the production of Alexander Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, staged at the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre in

21 Goff 2013, 429.

22 s.n. *Gordonua.com* 7.11.2014.

23 Since the start of his career in 1987, Hermanis has staged plays and adaptations by Anton Chekhov, Aleksei Arbuzov, Alexander Pushkin, Evgeny Grishkovec, Nikolai Gogol, Maxim Gorki, Vladimir Sorokin, Tatjana Tolstaya, Vasili Shukshin, Ilya Ilf and Yevgeni Petrov and Joseph Brodski, some for more than once. Hermanis often points out that Latvian culture itself is a result of cultural dialogues and hybridity related to Russian and German traditions (Бурмистрова *Взгляд* 18.4.2008).

2015, Eimuntas Nekrošius could not escape the historical parallels between the current geopolitical tensions and the early development of the Polish-Muscovite wars of the early seventeenth century as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth supported False Dmitry I's entrance onto the Russian throne. The action of the play jumps rapidly between Moscow, Poland (Cracow and Sambor), and the contested areas including Novgorod-Siversk and Sevsk and the Lithuanian-Russian frontier (namely "Tavern on the Lithuanian frontier"), situating thus Pushkin's Shakespearean drama of power within the polarized geopolitical framework of the Eastern European region and with the performance by Nekrošius in 2015 inevitably indicating centuries of alienating geopolitical stasis.²⁴

As Lithuanian theatre critic Rasa Vasinauskaitė put it (relating to the war in Ukraine): "In the context of the chaos that the end of peace brought about into our lives and minds, setting off polarization and isolation, mistrust and fear, 'Boris Godunov' wended up in an electrified field that affected both the process of production and the reception of the premier. Clearly what was expected was a 'personal position', a critical look at the text by Pushkin, and a new look at the history that is repeating itself."²⁵

Not only did Pushkin's literary work with all its humanist and liberal ideas "co-exist so comfortably" with Russian imperialism of the nineteenth century,²⁶ the author has also, throughout the twentieth century, been exploited as a major force of Russian cultural imperialism, although mainly through major recontextualizations and instrumentalizations. In the Soviet years, since the grand centenary celebrations of Pushkin's death in 1937, the figure of the poet has been appropriated by the Communist Party authorities in many ways and for different reasons. It seems that the production by Nekrošius was an attempt to reappropriate the classical poet back from the discourse of power and to restore the primary state of hermeneutic abundance and freedom of interpretations. The performance deals with a number of political subjects, including the opposition between the political elites and common people, represented in the performance by a group of speechless goofs, or between international political adversaries and ambitions, symbolized by a setting of a staircase shooting high up into nothingness as well as miniature reproductions of public buildings of Moscow and Kremlin walls with some Soviet inscriptions (See Figure 2). However, in the world of Nekrošius (famous for his apolitical attitudes) all these symbols and subjects emerge detached

24 The political situation of 2015 makes certain fragments of text sound very relevant. E. g. as Boris Godunov gives instructions upon learning that Poland supports False Dmitry: "TSAR. Listen: take steps this very hour that Russia / Be fenced by barriers from Lithuania; / That not a single soul pass o'er the border, / That not a hare run o'er to us from Poland, / Nor crow fly here from Cracow" (Pushkin 2017).

25 Vasinauskaitė *Lteatras* 5.12.2015.

26 I am referring here to Edward W. Said's article on Jane Austen and empire: "We are entitled to ask how this body of humanistic ideas co-existed so comfortably with imperialism, and why – until the resistance to imperialism *in the imperial domain*, among Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, developed – there was so little significant opposition or deterrence to empire at home." (Said 1994, 103).

from any instrumental undertakings aimed at any effect or consequence, overtaking, or seizure. Eventually, the way objects and performers are used in the *mise-en-scene* is so characteristic of Nekrošius's stand against any direct opposition to any political manipulation and resist the very logic or possibility for any power from outside the performance itself to direct the logic of material transformations.



FIGURE 2. Alexander Pushkin, *Boris Godunov* (2015, Lithuanian National Drama Theatre) directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius.

The opposition between Pushkin as a canonized instrument of the imperialist cultural diplomacy of Russia and the networks of culture spreading outside the activities and the scope of public (as well as traditional) diplomacy and outside the geopolitical intentions of governments is further supported in the performance of *Boris Godunov* by visual references to contemporary Russian dissident artists and critics of Kremlin's politics, like Petr Pavlensky. In one of the *mise-en-scenes* of the performance, the audience could recognize the figure on stage (Pushkin's "village idiot" *yurodivy* Nikolka) as a visual reference to Pavlenski who, in 2013, nailed his scrotum to the pavement of the Red Square in front of the Kremlin Wall in Moscow.

Cultural diplomacy as part of public diplomacy tends to turn the text of the play, especially the classical text into a certain "property" of a particular national culture (like Pushkin "belongs" to the Russian golden classics) and then the staging of the text (the stage, the actors, the music, etc.) is a secondary development, and a certain diplomacy which can be treated as respectful or disrespectful, aggressive or submissive, benevolent or dangerous. For

example, the production of Pushkin's novel in verse *Yevgeny Onegin* by Alvis Hermanis at the New Riga Theatre under the title *Onegin. Commentaries (Onegins. Komentāri, 2012)* – a dialogical, critical, ironic, and carnivalesque treatment of the Russian classic, pointing to certain historical realities of the nineteenth century (the lack of underwear, etc.) and the representation of Pushkin himself has been criticized by Russian public figures as an insolent and russophobic matter jeering at Russian values.²⁷

In the productions of both directors, we see the difficult attempts to keep up the intercultural dialogue and yet, at the same time, engage into a patient and difficult disentanglement of historical, imperial, and political relations within the fabric of culture. It is impossible to ignore either one of the realities: the history of 500 years of political opposition, traumas, and aggression, nor the cultural links and interconnections that have been developing both through the political power ties and in spite of them, in their gaps and against their logic. Culture at this point is not a naive self-generating alternative sphere but a result of an active construction and networking of international communities of intellectual disobedience and hermeneutic freedom. The production of *Boris Godunov* toured the Russian theatres and festivals and was eventually awarded the best foreign performance by the general consent of sixty Russian theatre critics.²⁸

Exchanges within Frozen Geographies

How are tours or other forms of cultural cooperation perceived in the context of border threats and dangers to the territorial integrity in contemporary geopolitics? We have experienced in the geopolitical context during recent decades that the concept of security has expanded (if compared to a more traditional realist conception based on primarily military national security). The new concepts of “general security” (from the 80s–90s) that pointed out global economic and ecological issues (the concepts represented by Barry Buzan²⁹) and, since 2000, the informational security, have complemented the military and hard approach to security issues with the new – post-modern, non-traditional, non-military, and soft security.³⁰ Culture, from this perspective, is also perceived not as a mere reflection of the existing order (as was the case in the old Cold War), nor as a humanist alternative (dissolving prejudice and disinformation) but rather as mutually constitutive of this order, integral for the emerging geopolitical dispositif of security. Dispositif of (international) security then inserts theatrical productions into a series of probable events,

27 Озолс TVNET 27.6.2012.

28 And in March 2018, *Boris Godunov* played as well at the National Maria Zankovecka Theatre in Lviv, Ukraine.

29 See Buzan 1991.

30 See Mutimer 2019. According to Paul Holtom though, the Baltic states find themselves faced with two different concepts of security, the post-modern European and the still modern Russian: “Although Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania appear to now be regarded as ‘the outer limit’ of an expanded new and postmodern Europe, it is generally suspected that modernist security concerns remain far higher on their security agendas than on those of their Western neighbours.” (Holtom 2005, 297).

including hybrid or any other military attack, information attacks and all kinds of destabilization of internal political situation, etc.³¹

Consequently, the tools for defence develop into a *dispositif*, an apparatus that combines information, economy, knowledge, institutions, cultural practices, and language itself. The strategies of foreign and security policies anticipate an integral approach: “National security is a vast combination of intersectoral measures, which provides that the education and involvement of as vast part of society as possible in the state defence is not only in the competence of the defence sector but also that of domestic affairs, education, culture and other sectors, and that a comprehensive approach is required.”³²

By expanding into the sphere of culture, the *dispositif* of security turns it into a constitutive part of competing geopolitical interests and identities among “fetishized states” and encloses artist practices in the territorial traps of state-centred modern geopolitical imagination or “frozen geographies” (as political theorist John Agnew would put it).³³ However, it does not only concern tours or festivals, but eventually staging foreign classics, offering an alternative historical interpretation or counter memory, in fact every aesthetic choice and speech codes may be regarded now in relation to security issues. Critical attitudes and political critique in theatre as a public sphere itself can be perceived as a dangerous weakening of confident citizenship bounds and loyalty to the sovereign state which then can be perceived as a contribution to the hostile foreign media or foreign troll factories disseminating panic, scorn, and uncertainty among local audiences.

In 2016, Alvis Hermanis have directed a mono performance for Mikhail Baryshnikov, based on the poems of Josif Brodsky, called *Brodsky/Baryshnikov*. In spite of the fact that there are so few or almost no political references to the geopolitical realities in the performance itself, both artists agreed that they would never tour this performance in Russia. Apart from that, however, there is no definite answer of how this particular performance relates to the geopolitical apparatus of security, except maybe the fact that it refuses to relate in any obvious way. The performance focuses primarily on the temporality felt already in a preserved “vintage” Russian language of an emigrant poet and as a major issue of Brodsky’s poetry. Time as the object of poetic language is further grasped by Baryshnikov’s performance and articulated into a personal and nostalgic narrative. The objects on stage, including an old alarm-clock and a reel-to-reel tape recorder with, supposedly, the recordings of Brodsky reading his poems, are unambiguous

31 The probable scenarios of international relations in Eastern Europe are under constant construction since 2014: see for example Ivanauskas, Janeliūnas, Jasutis, Jonavičius, Kasčiūnas, Keršanskas and Kojala 2016; *Latvian Foreign and Security Policy: Yearbook 2015, 2015* (2016, 2017, 2018), etc.

32 *Latvian Foreign and Security Policy: Yearbook 2017, 2017*, 247.

33 Agnew points out that when international relations are perceived exclusively in territorial terms this perception is limited: it territorialises power at the nation-state scale and thus denies it to other spatial configurations involving place-making and spatial interaction and it creates a notion of the “international” that freezes in time our conceptions of politics as always involving an external anarchy versus an internal order, rigidly bordered states, equal sovereignties, etc. Hence, the frozen geographies and territorial traps of modern political imagination (see Agnew 2003 and Agnew 2010).

symbols of time or of the journey through time as well as re-calling and re-reading the past (see Figure 3). However, even more so, the whole aesthetic key of this poetry mono performance (a kind of obsolescent genre from the 70s and the 80s in Eastern Europe) works as a kind of break and a detachment from the current political reality, a retreat into the autonomy of the nostalgic genre and intimate narrative of friendship of two emigrant New Yorkers.



FIGURE 3. *Brodsky/Baryshnikov* (2016, New Riga Theatre) directed by Alvis Hermanis.

This refusal however can be seen as a certain contradiction of the temporal versus the spatial, as a refusal to give credit to geographical dimensions, notwithstanding their striking trajectories, encompassing all the complex network of the Cold War borders and partitions extending from Arkhangelsk to Brooklyn in the biographies of both Brodsky and Baryshnikov. Their meeting, performed as (according to Hermanis) "a seance" of cosmopolitan individual spirits, is articulated in textual and corporeal sensibilities that are not contained in any possible geopolitical way. Outside the limits of international relations that see political containers called nation-states as the only possible mode of politics, the performance of *Brodsky/Baryshnikov* remains uncontained and avoids any image of closed and spatially limited community. And if, as R. B. J. Walker claims, our modern concept of politics is reified through spatial categories, and frozen geographies is the only image that we have to portray the International

(as a violent, endless struggle of self-contained sovereign nation-states),³⁴ it is exactly the focus on time issues – memory, death, nostalgia, re-reading, return, reconstruction – that gives the performance this sense of alternative, of moving along a different axis or of a different distribution of the sensible. The ghost meeting of two dissident political refugees through the memory act in the slow and intimate passage of solo performance offers existence outside space represented as state territorialities with all its supposed stasis, changelessness, and intellectual stability.³⁵ It is not avoidance of the territorial trap, but movement beyond it.

While Nekrošius, in his performance of *Boris Godunov*, a rare address to political matters, offers frozen, unchanging space, a stasis of immutable geometry of government buildings and state borders (the conception of immobility and recurrence is already present in the play by Pushkin), Hermanis in *Brodsky/Baryshnikov* breaks down the spatial stasis through the streaming of time and time linkages that overwhelm the geographical divides as eventually meaningless. Hermanis' performance thus can be said to defy the modern geopolitical imagination with its fetishized state-centred power relations and opens up an intimacy of private experiences of the multiplicity of time, of circulations of temporal experiences outside the territorial limits, traps, containers.

Despite the different positions and arguments on the matter of taking sides, the fact is that nobody in theatre feels comfortable and at home within the frozen geographies of contemporary geopolitics. The three examples of performances, however, refuse to just do what they are expected and stay inside the frameworks marked for them by the regimes of propaganda wars, public diplomacy, or dispositif of security: some see the performances as an escape from the propaganda schemes, others as a contestation of the geopolitical partitions altogether and the way roles are distributed along geopolitical lines, yet others try to move beyond territorial traps and to establish new regimes of mobility, sensibility, and freedom.

What we see in all of these productions, however, is that the challenge for contemporary theatre artists is to find ways to move beyond the territorial traps of the frozen geographies of contemporary political developments, geopolitical imagination, and a general dispositif of security, and to look for networks and inspirations of intellectual disobedience in a world where every acre of land belongs to the territory of some state.

34 See Walker 2009. Also, according to Philippe Bonditti: "maybe the International can be understood as the specific regime of *spatio-temporal* limits deeply and firmly rooted in a geometrical and teluric model inherited from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and within which *political life* has come to settle. Although it has become deeply unsatisfactory, especially regarding the particular way it has organized our practical engagement with and in the "world," the fact remains that as a regime of spatio-temporal limits embodied in the modern system of fixed borders, fixed territories and fixed individual (citizenship) and collective (national) identities, the International seems to have developed as a *solution* for human communities to cohabit on the planet – sometimes pacifically, sometimes not and always giving rise to relations of domination and exploitation." (Bonditti 2017, 6).

35 See Agnew 2003, 53.

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