

How to Resolve the Trauma of Exile? Negotiating Cultural Trauma in Three Baltic Exile Plays from the 1970s North America

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ABSTRACT

The Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians who were forced to leave their respective homelands after World War II in the wake of Soviet occupation came to form exile communities across the world. These communities continued their cultural traditions and practices with the arts becoming a medium to reaffirm their identities in exile and narrate their experiences. But with a quarter of a century having passed since their migration, the 1970s became a period of re-evaluating this focus, often represented by topics of generational conflict or inability to change with the times. In North America, first generation Baltic exile playwrights Ilmar Külvet, Alfreds Straumanis, and Algirdas Landsbergis often scrutinized the condition of exile within their works. In this study, I will examine the Baltic narrative of exile as a cultural trauma and take into focus three works by these authors with representations reflecting on the changing times and crises of belonging and identity. The three plays also present a way out of these tensions and can be considered deliberate efforts by the authors to shift cultural discourse and explore other creative potentials of exile, best facilitated by negotiating between the old and the new, the traumatic past, and the ever-changing present.

KEYWORDS

Exile, exile theatre, Baltic exiles, Baltic exile drama, cultural trauma, Ilmar Külvet, Alfreds Straumanis, Algirdas Landsbergis.

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Introduction

For the post-WWII Baltic diasporas in the 1970s, more than two decades had passed since escaping from the homeland and two decades more remained until the homeland was to become free. Alongside the major shifts in the political and cultural landscapes of the 60s, particularly in North America, the 70s brought with them introspections on how the arts had developed in exile and whether change was necessary. Within Baltic exile literary discourse, the dilemma of the old and the new, what to discard, what to keep, what new to explore, became increasingly pervasive issues – if Baltic literature in the free world were to survive, what would facilitate it? The safety of a monolingual community or the opportunities of a multicultural host society?

This study will explore the undercurrents of this shift and propose three examples from Baltic exile drama literature as deliberate attempts of its time to negotiate through the trauma of exile. Moreover, the plays reflect cultural and political currents relevant in American society at the time, blending the exile experience with the said currents of the host society and proposing a new model of identity beyond the *trauma* of exile.

Historical background

The Baltic post-WWII diaspora emerged as a result of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians escaping the Soviet occupation of their homelands, the largest migration occurring in the autumn of 1944, mainly arriving in Sweden and Germany at first, and then remaining there or continuing onwards to create large communities in the Americas or the British Commonwealth nations. The loss of homeland, the traumatic escape journeys, refugee life in German Displaced Persons camps and acculturation in host countries shaped narratives, both artistic and political, within these exile communities for the rest of the twentieth century. Theatre was an important arena for artistic expression from the beginnings of this exile, starting already from drama circles in DP camps¹, serving (especially so in the post-war decades) as a medium for preserving old literature, nostalgia for the homelands lost, and educating the young². This purpose left little room for creative experimentations and explorations beyond the boundaries of exile. The condition of exile, particularly its tragedy, was to remain the focal point of theatre-making.

The 60s and 70s spelled potential breakthroughs for diaspora theatres in North America due to the possibilities afforded by government funding in the United States³ and Canada⁴, but these “remained the main place where ethnic audiences could see plays reflecting their special concerns.”⁵ In Canada, both early twentieth-century and post-WWII multicultural theatres

1 Kruuspere 2008, 316; Hilton 2009, 299; Gattrell 2009, 9.

2 Kruuspere 2008, 318-319; Landsbergis 1983, 312-313; Vaškėlis 1983, 326.

3 Schwarz-Seller 1983, 12.

4 Freeman 2007, 42.

5 Schwarz-Seller 1983, 14.

remained places with the purpose of preserving culture and language of the homeland and tying the community together⁶. In general, experimentation and the avant-garde, a staple of American drama of the time, were headed more by the younger generation⁷, but remained generally distrusted⁸. The 60s and the 70s in Baltic exile theatre were largely a time for a changing of the guard, as the exile theatre professionals gave way to, mainly, amateur theatre makers⁹. With Baltic exile theatre remaining largely an amateur endeavour, artistic choices would often follow the community's interests, meaning a focus on only specific themes, authors and genres.

For Estonians, by the examples of the major theatre centres in North America and Sweden, the 70s were a prolific period in variety¹⁰. However, drama remained a marginal presence in the Estonian exile literary corpus¹¹. For American Latvians, this period in exile theatre faced a standstill, from Latvian troupes refusing to stage texts written in Soviet Latvia to the audience preferring older works¹²; for American Lithuanians the production of plays peaked by the 60s and the 70s were particularly regarded as a period of stagnation, reasoned to have been because of assimilation¹³. Baltic exile theatre in North America, while rich in community projects and having several active authors, was facing a decline, facilitated by a lack of professional theatre-makers. This in turn left little opportunity in breaking beyond the mould of educative and nostalgic purposes of Baltic exile theatre.

Comparative examinations of Baltic exile drama literature are still few, particularly in recent years. Through a broader scope, Baltic drama in the twentieth-century has been examined by Benedikts Kalnačs in *20th Century Baltic Drama: Postcolonial Narratives, Decolonial Options* (2016), which in its postcolonial lens focuses solely on the works and authors in the Baltic Soviet Republics. Modern research into Baltic exile theatre as a whole has the challenge of fragmentation in the communities across the world, but Canada and the United States, hosting large and adjacent communities with similar opportunities and challenges for theatre-making, offer many opportunities for comparative research.

On Exile and exile theatre

Edward Said, in his essay *Reflections on Exile*, defined the condition of exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and his native place, between the self and its true home”¹⁴, an existence always undermined by loss¹⁵. While diasporic experience itself, often shaped by trauma and displacement, can greatly inspire and inform artistic endeavours¹⁶, exile's perceived nobility and creative potential appears to be more enshrined by figures such as Hugo or Hemingway rather than the traumatic forced migrations of the twentieth century. David Bevan summarises the dilemma in his introduction to *Literature in Exile*: “Both theorists and exiles themselves - of whatever kind- have long debated whether the experience is predominantly one that invigorates or mutilates. For some, undoubtedly, the sense of release, of critical distance, of renewed identity, of fusion or shock of cultures and even of languages, is interpreted as productive, generating a proposition that originality of vision must almost necessarily derive from the transgressing and transcending of frontiers. However, for others, physical displacement means rather rejection, alienation, anguish and, quite possibly, suicide”.¹⁷ “Exile” can be a term loaded with tragedy, but also carrying within itself immense creative potential. The liminality of the exilic experience allows to blend, to cross boundaries, to transgress, or to remain in the introspections of loss.

6 Berger 1989, 353.

7 Kruuspere 2008, 318; Straumanis 1981, 120.

8 Vaškelis 1983, 326.

9 Kruuspere 2008, 318; Straumanis 1983, 310; Vaškelis 1983, 331.

10 Kruuspere 2008, 324.

11 Kruuspere 2008, 315.

12 Landsbergis 1983, 310-11.

13 Vaškelis 1983, 330.

14 Said 2002, 180.

15 *ibid.*

16 *ibid.*

17 Bevan 1990, 4.

When it comes to Baltic exile literature, this dilemma or duality also came to prominent discourse by the 1970s. Lithuanian exile literary critic, Rimvydas Šilbajoris, notes in his 1970 compendium, *The Perfection of Exile: Fourteen Contemporary Lithuanian Writers*, that the condition of exile became an inescapable notion for the Lithuanian writer, being not only a traumatic personal experience but a loss of “historical continuum” and “working in a context in which the written Lithuanian word is, in an important sense, an irrelevance.”¹⁸ But despite this detriment, Šilbajoris suggests that exile presents with itself a “challenge” to explore new possibilities¹⁹, something which some writers would not explore, remaining focused on works “in which the quiet brooks of the homeland keep on flowing, and the trees rustle, and old neighbours from a village, not knowing that they have become mere ghosts, come over and shake your hand.”²⁰ Nostalgia and loss were commonplace themes in all of Baltic exile literature. However, moving beyond it was not necessarily a choice between assimilation or remaining true to one’s heritage, but rather asking whether the unique situation of the Baltic diaspora could offer new avenues of creative expression beyond loss and preservation.

In his plenary lecture at the Third Conference on Baltic Studies in the University of Toronto in 1972, the Estonian exile literary critic, Ivar Ivask, reflected on this description of the Lithuanian exile experience in literature, concurring on the same applying to Estonian and Latvian exile writers as well, but observing that most writers situate between varying stages of compromise between the two extremes²¹. He likened this dilemma to the challenges faced by all minor literatures, choosing between “national identity” and “indiscriminate cosmopolitanism”, overcome, perhaps, only by synthesis²². Critic and historian Juris Silenieks reflects on the Latvian perspective similarly in his overview of Latvian exile literature: “If the political dimension of exile first enlarged the committed writer’s vision, later it acted as a stranglehold. As an emotional state, exile cannot become endemic. Because of its initial intensity, it is likely to deteriorate fast. And only a lucid recognition of the fact that what is left of the incipient poignancy of shock and outrage is only perhaps a dull ache can rescue the committed writer from being trapped in the fixation of ideological orthodoxy and values that may turn out to be less than infallible and incorruptible.”²³ It can therefore be surmised that the 70s in particular were a period of desired change for Baltic exile literature, a period that still reflected on the traumatic past, but was also in search of something new. For Baltic exile theatre, a largely community-run cultural arena intertwined with its community’s demand, adapting to the changing times proved to be a challenge.

Exile theatre itself can be particularly sensitive to the challenges of in-betweenness wrought by the condition. Yana Meerzon suggests in *Performing Exile, Performing Self* that exile theatre “considers itself growing in parallel to the adopted culture and to that of a diaspora,”²⁴ while challenging the broader audience with the need “to recognize foreign signs and to learn new cultural codes”²⁵. Meerzon’s modern model does not discount the trauma of the past, but also includes under the umbrella of “exile theatre” other possibilities and a desire to also engage audiences outside the exile community. Exilic artists face a binary of past/present²⁶, in the case of Baltic exiles a lost homeland and a traumatic escape from it, and the ever-changing present of the host country. According to Meerzon, exilic artists “seek creolized experiences: they tend to adapt to the professional demands of their new theatre homes and simultaneously aim to maintain their professional skills, i.e., stay true to the acting, directing, or writing techniques brought from home.”²⁷ In the case of Baltic exile theatre by the 70s, with its attempts to be a continuation of homeland theatre and remain largely in the confines of the diaspora community, creolisation of the exile artist was rare, and to become the domain of the younger generation.

18 Šilbajoris 1970, 22.

19 *ibid.*

20 *ibid.*

21 Ivask 1972, 2.

22 *op. cit.* 3.

23 Silenieks 1972.

24 Meerzon 2012, 298.

25 Ambros, Couture, Meerzon. 2003, 120.

26 *op. cit.* 298

27 *ibid.*

Meerzon's view of exilic theatre with its potential to be a flexible and adaptive creative space, prone to the avant-garde and in-betweenness, can be seen to emerge in the works of some Baltic exile dramatists, even in the 1950s. However, as is evident in the 70s scholarly reviews of the state of Baltic exile literature, there remained a tendency to focus on nostalgia and loss instead, to serve a didactic purpose and continue the traditions of homeland theatre.

Meerzon points out that it is cosmopolitanism that affords the exile artist far greater freedoms than nationalistic discourses²⁸, a means of going forward also carefully proposed by exile scholars. Exilic theatre, in her view, privileges the position of the outsider that aligns with neither the dominant culture nor that of their diaspora community²⁹, and often speaks to both and that of the homeland³⁰. In her 2020 book, *Performance, Subjectivity, Cosmopolitanism*, she proposes "opening the past/present binary of exile into the simultaneity of cosmopolitanism: a rhizomatic process of becoming that reflects the position of the cosmopolitan subject who is constantly on the move and forced by the conditions of labour, politics, or physical and economic upheaval to seek new opportunities elsewhere."³¹ An approach that describes the mobilities of the modern diaspora and less so, perhaps, the mid-twentieth-century exile theatres run by communities with a goal of cultural survival.

Attempts were made at the time to engage the American audiences through translation, writing in English and experimenting with contemporary tropes. Algirdas Landsbergis whose bibliography involves all of the aforementioned, was a first-generation exile writer staged for Lithuanian and Anglophone audiences even well into the twenty-first century³². The other authors chosen for this study, Ilmar Külvet and Alfreds Straumanis, saw the potential of exile theatre as a forum rather than a means for just introspections on the past, capable of engaging broader audiences.

Exile as Cultural Trauma

The condition of exile could be viewed as a cultural trauma, a phenomenon examined within *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka, defined by Smelser as "an invasive and overwhelming event that is believed to undermine or overwhelm one or several essential ingredients of a culture or the culture as a whole."³³ A particular form that is relevant to Baltic exiles is what Smelser describes as national trauma, which involves a claim of cultural damage (such as exile, loss of homeland) established and perpetuated by cultural carriers (such as writers and community leaders)³⁴. That claim is often contested through denial or a different interpretation that must always evoke a certain type of emotion and be sustained and reproduced to retain its status³⁵. This trauma becomes a narrative that pervades the arena's aesthetic, politics, and more³⁶. This view does not call into question the validity of the said trauma or its causes, but describes a sociocultural process.

Exile by its nature can imply a traumatic process, the very event that caused the unhealable rift between self and homeland described by Said. In the case of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, the harrowing escape, being regarded as "displaced persons" rather than refugees in the process, and the ever-present possibility of liberation and return, all left a mark on the exile communities' cultural consciousness. Returning to the topic of exile theatre, the condition of exile would be a central theme for all of the above-mentioned drama texts³⁷. With the exile theatres' tendency to focus on preservation and tragedy, surrounding and surrounded by the traumatic event of exile and its rift that could not be healed, I propose that Baltic exile theatre could also be viewed as an arena of cultural trauma. Observations from the 70s by

28 Meerzon 2012, 294.

29 Meerzon 2017, 29.

30 op. cit., 30.

31 Meerzon 2020, 6.

32 Sruoginis 2022, 61.

33 Smelser 2004, 38.

34 op. cit., 39.

35 ibid.

36 Alexander 2004, 15-16.

37 Kruuspere 2008, 329; Straumanis 1981, 120; Landsbergis 1981, 384.

Šilbajoris, Ivask and Silenieks suggest that Baltic exile literature as whole tended to focus on loss and continuity, which can be viewed as responses chosen and deemed acceptable within the narrative of a cultural trauma. Within a cultural arena that has been designated by the community as a platform for discussing said trauma, change is met with resistance and controversy. The very same observations also, however, suggest a potential for change, as playwrights can be carriers for the said trauma, but also the potential of contesting it.

On the authors

As examples of this change, I present three plays from this era by Baltic exile dramatists in North America, *A Bridge Across the Sea* (first published in 1970, translated to English in 1983) by Ilmar Külvet (1920-2002), *It's Different Now, Mr Abele* (produced and translated in 1972) by Alfreds Straumanis (1921-2011) and *The Last Picnic* (produced 1971, translated in 1978) by Algirdas Landsbergis (1924-2004), two of which were regarded as controversial for their themes and all of which represented a resolution to the grieving exile condition, while also being thematically more in tune with modern North American drama of the time.

Ilmar Külvet was, as well as being a dramatist, a prosaist, a poet, and a journalist. He is regarded as a defining figure for Estonian theatre in exile and who was in favour of using the medium as a means to discuss issues controversial to the Estonian diaspora at the time. A recurring theme throughout Külvet's works, both as a playwright and a novelist, has been the condition of exile, not always through satirical devices outright but polemic ones nonetheless, an example most synonymous with this being the play *A Bridge Across the Sea*³⁸. First published in 1968, the play is often paired in scholarly works with Külvet's prior work "Lamp ei tohi kustuda" (*The Light Must Not Go Out* 1966-1968), which has been considered a more psychologically superficial variant of the former³⁹ that satirises exile experience, particularly that of an exile artist. His other plays of note that deal with this theme, blending drama with satire, are "Trooja hobune" (*The Trojan Horse*, 1965) and "Suletud aken" (*The Closed Window*, 1971).

Alfreds Straumanis (1921-2011) was better known as a theatre scholar and practitioner than a playwright. Two of his significant works are *Little Devil's Christmas* (1959) a children's play with motifs from folklore and *It's Different Now, Mr. Abele* (1972), the latter being the most (in) famous and comparable to *A Bridge Across the Sea*. Besides his creative works, his lasting projects have been to showcase and catalogue not only works and authors of Baltic drama in exile, but translations of works from the Baltic countries themselves.

The works of Algirdas Landsbergis (1924-2004) within both drama and prose can be described as 'in-between'. He deliberately combined the new and the old, motifs of religion and folklore (particularly that of folk music) with the absurd and tragicomic that was contemporary of his time, wrote in both Lithuanian and English, which is exemplified by the comedy *The Last Picnic* (1971, published in English 1978). His most famous play, *Five Posts in a Market Place* (1958, later produced in English 1961), was a success on North American stages both Lithuanian and Anglophone, a trauma narrative of members of an unspecified resistance fighting a 'New Order' during a military occupation.

The three plays by these Baltic exile authors have been translated into English and were also popular among theatre audiences. Translation and documentation not only imply the effort to preserve and popularise ethnic culture outside their homelands, but to attract other audiences as well. Alfreds Straumanis's made significant strides to catalogue and showcase Baltic plays outside the Soviet Union. He was the editor of *Baltic Drama: A Handbook and Bibliography* published in 1981 and four drama text anthologies. The first of these, *Confrontations With Tyranny* (1977), showcased Latvian and Lithuanian exile works that depict resistance to the occupations of the Baltic states, juxtaposed with three works from Soviet Latvia and Estonia. *The Golden Steed* (1979) included works based on Baltic mythology. *Bridge Across the Sea* (1983) included specifically the works of Baltic exiles in North America. The final anthology *Fire and Night* (1986) focused on Baltic authors' works with a more mythological and fantasy-like bent.

Each of these anthologies come with accompanying essays instructing laypersons on how

38 Kruuspere 2008, 343.

39 Epner 1991, 90.

to navigate the topics of Baltic history and society (both within home and exile) represented in the plays. *A Bridge Across the Sea* and *It's Different Now, Mr. Abele* were published in English in the 1983 anthology, which was titled after the former. The plays are prefaced with essays by Baltic exile scholars Hilja Pikat (for *Bridge Across the Sea*) and Andrés Šedriks (for *It's Different Now, Mr Abele*). Pikat describes the condition of exile as central to the play, the title indicating a need to build bridges between the old and new, to negotiate the two extremes⁴⁰. Šedriks describes similar themes represented in Straumanis's play, alongside "a perspective against the background of a hyperkinetic era" of the 60s⁴¹. Algirdas Landsbergis's *The Last Picnic* in its 1978 English variant was an independent publication, but also included an introduction by the writer Michael Novak, celebrating how it represents hopefulness in wake of change⁴². With the focus towards an Anglophone reader, these publications mark a desire to engage audiences beyond exile communities.

There has been recent scholarly interest in one of the authors chosen for this study, Algirdas Landsbergis – "Trauma, Narrative and History: Representation of Traumatic Experience in the Works of Algirdas Landsbergis" by Gabija Bankauskaitė and Loreta Huber published in *Interlitteraria* (2021), noting a common theme of overcoming trauma in his works and a tendency to mix the real and surreal in his plays. "Two interpretations – two continents: a reading of Algirdas Landsbergis's play, *Five Posts in a Market Place*", by Laima Vince Sruoginis in *Journal of Baltic Studies* (2022), presents one of the most renowned plays by Landsbergis as having been successful in engaging both Lithuanian and Anglophile audiences from the time of its writing in the 50s to the early beginnings of the twenty-first century.

Building bridges in *A Bridge Across the Sea*

*A Bridge Across the Sea*⁴³, originally written in 1968 and produced in 1970, takes place in the span of one evening in 1965 at an affluent home in "a large city in Canada"⁴⁴ of a callous and arrogant engineer Paul Toomik, his wife Helga and two daughters, Meeli and Linda. The opening scene takes place on the shores of Estonia on the eve of the second Soviet occupation, and where Paul assaults his friend Vello to gain the last spot on a refugee boat to Sweden. He is later revealed to have met Vello's sweetheart, Helga, who was pregnant with Linda at the time, marries her, but grows to resent his secret foster daughter. Both the assault, as witnessed by the boat captain, and the victim himself, come to haunt Paul and his family in the present, leading to a metamorphosis in how the family regards their community, their heritage, and their goals in life.

In the span of the evening, Vello, who had apparently survived Paul's assault, arrives at the household⁴⁵. He had come to the city as a member of the Soviet Estonian dignitaries and diplomats.⁴⁶ The visit causes a transformation within the family, starting with Linda, whose rebelliousness and conflict with being Estonian is immediately resolved, after knowing she has a link in her true father. Paul resolves to value human relationships and expresses his disinterest in the position of a diplomat and Helga realises her mental absence from her family and decides to no longer treat life as theatre⁴⁷. The characterisation was specific to the point that it roused controversy in its home audience of Canada.

The play was famously refused to be staged in 1972 during the Global Estonian Cultural Days (ECD, or "ESTO" in Estonian abbreviation) in Toronto. Despite this, by the 80s, the play had "been repeatedly produced" in Estonian exile communities across the world⁴⁸. Külvet himself knowingly did not shy away from controversial topics, having said "in that way, you force people to think, wake them up from the stasis of indifference,"⁴⁹ establishing an authorial

40 Pikat 1983, 29.

41 Šedriks 1983, 214.

42 Novak in Landsbergis 1978, 5-6.

43 Külvet 1983.

44 Külvet 1983, 31.

45 op.cit., 65.

46 op. cit., 73.

47 op. cit., 75-76.

48 Pikat 1983, 23.

49 translated from Estonian; Noorhani, 2019.

intent with the play in bringing up taboo topics, particularly evident in the way how the family transforms during the span of the play. The controversy stemmed from the play's representation of issues contemporary to the Estonian exile community in Canada at the time⁵⁰. The opening scene became a focal point for this controversy, emphasised by the audience impressions that the play represented caricatures, a dysfunctional and un-idealised exile family within the play. In 1972, a letter under the pseudonym "Toronto Vaim" ("The Spirit of Toronto") was published in the Canadian Estonian periodical, *Vaba Eestlane*, in response to the ECD controversy, summarising the play's plot of Paul betraying Vello on the Estonian shores to represent the exiles as traitors to people left behind and living an easy life abroad⁵¹. It relates to the process of cultural trauma needing constant upkeep, in this case the to preserve the old and reflect on loss. The cultural trauma of the Estonian exile should be carried by an emotional and a historical narrative that remains under these purposes, and Külvet's representation of exile life differs from it.

In Paul, there is the head of the family and a pillar of the exile community whose escape from Soviet terror was marred by betrayal. In Helga, there is the model and cultured Estonian wife, whose activities in the community turn out to be just for show. In Linda, there is the rebellious Estonian youth, who flirts with the world view opposed by the community just to spite her father. Using the backdrop of escaping Estonia, a traumatic memory for a lot of Estonian exiles, as a setting for betrayal, not heroics or lamentations, conflicts with the established trauma narrative may be read as a contestation of it, despite Külvet's clear intent of simply using the event as a device to discuss contemporary issues. In subverting cultural trauma of exile, the play crosses a boundary, employing the creative potential specific to the liminalities of an exilic artist.

In all of the selected plays, the societal changes of the 60s are a recurring theme. While more of a footnote in *A Bridge Across the Sea*, mentions of Vietnam and even Anti-Soviet protests in the backdrop serve not only as a device to inform the setting but as a presence looming over the family as a microcosm of exile society, facing an ever-present duality. All the selected plays also fit thematically with representations most popular at the time, which Heuval observes as "almost single-minded attention paid in American drama during the period to social mobility, themes of belonging and alienation, and to the family as the barometer of personal development,⁵²" particularly evident in *A Bridge Across the Sea*.

The resolution to the exilic tensions of generational conflict and belonging differs in Külvet's play to the other plays examined in the paper. It is in meeting Vello, who, as a '*kodueestlane*' ('Estonian of the home'), represents the distant and lost presence of the homeland, the transformation of the family begins. However, the resolution does not necessarily suggest the need to return, but to build bridges between the new and old and not be divided as a community, as an answer to the changing times. However, keepsakes or ideals from home may be of comfort but will erode away in time, a notion carried by the other plays in this study.

To change or to perish within *It's Different Now, Mr Abele*

Alfreds Straumanis's *It's Different Now, Mr. Abele*⁵³ is set in 1969 during two days before Christmas at a Latvian household "in a small American college town where the students outnumber the townspeople."⁵⁴ Landsbergis emphasises dialogue over plot itself, with the conflicts unfolding between lengthy discussions of Latvians in America and the 60s, serving as rhetorical devices and comparisons for the problems at the Abele household. Karlis Abele (shortened to 'Karl' in the translation), a conservative and ever-serious philosophy professor at his university is expecting tenure for his years of work. His university is facing changes however, heralded by his fellow Latvian colleagues in the college, the younger Laimonis, who considers himself apolitical, not resisting change but also not letting it define him, and the older Sudrabs simply following the left-leaning trends for his own gain. Karl lives with his wife Velta, who tries her best to humanise her husband, and their troubled daughter Sarmite. Once

50 Translated from Estonian; Noorhani, 2019.

51 Toronto Vaim pseud. 1972, 2.

52 Heuval 2018, 25.

53 Straumanis 1983.

54 *ibid.*, 219.

again, each character can be viewed as representing caricatures of exile society, with the older generation that resists change or cynically plays along with it, and the younger generation having to choose their identity.

Similarly, to *A Bridge Across the Sea*, intergenerational conflict is not only a device for conflict but one of the central themes. After Sarmite comes home intoxicated, Karl sees her to embody all that is wrong with not only the youth of America, but that of young Latvian Americans as well. Sarmite, only seeking happiness, expresses the central tension within the play: "In order to build my life I have to use two different types of material and such a building often becomes an anachronism and almost the opposite of the builder's aesthetic expectations."⁵⁵ Sarmite, much like Linda, representing a second generation exile in America, with no memories of homeland and the need to negotiate the expectations of both her ethnic community and host society, is shown to be lost and unable to find a place where she belongs. However, while Linda is faced with closure to her internal conflict through meeting her real father, gaining belonging with the homeland, Sarmite manages to negotiate the two extremes and find centre through revealing her romantic feelings for Laimonis, a balance which Karl ultimately fails to find.

The play's culmination is a philosophical spat between Karl and his superior Sudrabs on what makes a true Latvian. There is no true winner of the argument nor any of the on-going conflicts, with only Karl collapsing in distress under the weight of not gaining tenure because of his world-views. The ideological conflicts of the 60s are another major theme, even the protagonist's downfall. The redundancy and futility of Karl's efforts are hinted at from the beginning in a long sequence wherein he presents his lecture materials in English to Laimonis, who is to transcribe and translate it to Latvian. Laimonis comments on the task:

LAIMONIS: It sounds almost strange – a Latvian philosopher prepares his lectures in a foreign language, and a student, who has studied Latvian only because it was forced onto him by his mother, translates them for the Latvian youth in spite of the fact this youth speaks and writes the foreign language better than the professor who prepares his lectures in that foreign language.⁵⁶

Serving as a sardonic commentary on the in-betweenness of exilic experience at the time, the passage sets the theme for the rest of the play.

Straumanis's student, André Šedriks, notes in his introductory essay that the play was the author's response to "the stagnation of the Latvian ethnic theatre and the over-production of shallow comedies by Latvian American writers."⁵⁷ In his work as a theatre professional, Šedriks describes Straumanis as one to "promulgate the necessity of change in keeping with the times and the new environment"⁵⁸ and that "characters, as created by the Latvian dramatists in exile, should not only have "Latvian" traits".⁵⁹ Šedriks also compares Straumanis's controversiality to that of Ilmar Kūlvēt's *A Bridge Across the Sea* and the works of the Lithuanian exile author Antanas Škema⁶⁰. Comparison to Škema is significant, as one of his most controversial plays *Ataraxia* (also published in English in the same anthology) deals with potential forgiveness and co-existence between a victim and an oppressor, meeting in a limbo-like afterlife. In the introductory essay of Škema's play by Straumanis himself, he reflects on this notion as being unacceptable to Lithuanian exiles who actively fight against the Soviet occupation of their homeland and consider their exile as temporary⁶¹ and also explains further the comparison between him and Škema.

Similarly, to *Ataraxia*, Straumanis's resolution in the play (which in a more extreme reading seems to suggest to move on or perish) may clash in this reading with the Latvian exile narrative that still sought to preserve old ideals. Herein, once again, comes to play the narrative of cultural trauma, which on its establishment laid out a groundwork on how the said trauma should and

55 Straumanis 1983, 249.

56 *ibid.*, 266-268.

57 Šedriks 1983, 211.

58 *op. cit.*, 212.

59 *ibid.*

60 *op. cit.*, 211.

61 *op. cit.*, 346.

should not be discussed. Similarly, to *Kūlvēt*, Straumanis depicts a less-than-ideal picture of an exile household, but quite deliberately points the source of dysfunction to be rigidity in the old ways. Similarly, to *Kūlvēt*, Straumanis seems to suggest building bridges as well – as Šedriks notes, the stubborn Karl and the morally bankrupt Sudrabs serve more as a Hegelian construct, whereas the younger generation represent a “rational synthesis” of the two forces within the play⁶². Straumanis’s resolution of this conflict implies therefore a prompt for discourse over whether to remain stuck in the modalities and trauma of exiled Latvians, or rather to negotiate between and build upon the old and the new. While both *Kūlvēt* and *Straumanis* do not actually dismiss cultural trauma, proposals for change can be viewed as contestation, as evident in their controversial reactions.

Moving on within *The Last Picnic*

The Lithuanian example within this study presents similar issues through a more comedic and absurd lens. Algirdas Landsbergis’s *The Last Picnic* opens in the 60s at “the rectory of a melting Lithuanian parish at the edge of a New England town, nestled close to a spacious meadow, ringed by old trees⁶³”. Every year, the local Lithuanian community celebrates a picnic at the grounds during Midsummer, which the parish’s new and young spiritual shepherd, simply named the ‘Priest’, immediately cancels on the grounds of morality. He is opposed in this by Bartholomew, the organiser and “Generalissimo of Picnics”, who regards the event as the last thing holding the Lithuanian community together and keeping continuation with the old country.

The conflict of world-view is more nuanced in *The Last Picnic*, wherein both sides have to give away some part. The urgency to adapt with the times is stated in the scene where Bartholomew hears of the picnic being cancelled:

PRIEST: “The times, they are a-changing.” Everything’s changing.

BARTHOLOMEW: Everything?! What crap! How can everything change?! Here – the shadow of the cross, from the steeple across the meadow! Is the cross changing?

PRIEST: The cross remains – the church is changing. We’re finally unmooring ourselves from the Middle Ages.

BARTHOLOMEW: Horse piss, that’s what’s changing. The things that matter, they don’t change. Won’t the fall come again? Winter, spring and summer? Without change. And men will pray and sing and drink and die.

PRIEST: There’s another world, outside your meadow, and it’s changing. It must change!⁶⁴

In desperation, Bartholomew decides to feign a heart attack in an effort to find sympathy with the young Priest, which fails to preserve the picnic tradition but prompts introspection within the two characters. A secondary conflict runs between Bartholomew and his son Barty Jr, a rock musician who had always rejected his father’s attempts to bring him closer to Lithuanian culture. After long persuasion by his father, Barty Jr. finally comes to visit the picnic looking for inspiration for a new song.

Both the Priest and Bartholomew transform throughout the play. The former ponders on Bartholomew’s harsh reaction, contemplating even on his nature as a spirit-like figure of the past. He receives a vision within the morning mist of the rectory and realises the importance of the picnic for the community, allowing it to happen one last time. Bartholomew, on the other hand understands he has to let go and, in finding a Lithuanian folk song that appeals to his

62 Šedriks 1983, 217

63 Landsbergis 1978, 10.

64 op. cit., 26.

son, manages to mend his relationship with him. The band asks Bartholomew to become their manager. Having lost Acadia with the picnic, he goes on to search for it with the band scheduled to perform in Acadia Park.

Of the selected authors, Landsbergis employed the in-betweenness of the exilic condition the most throughout his works. Bankauskaitė and Huber have already given an overview of representations of trauma in Landsbergis's works, also discussing cultural trauma⁶⁵. They agree with a prior-observation by Daubenas of *The Last Picnic* describing: how the playwright in exile carries within himself two irreconcilable realities: "one being the native with an inherited culture and tradition, the other being the alien and the adopted."⁶⁶ but also notes that Landsbergis's works are "not entirely pessimistic⁶⁷" despite the condition of exile being a pervasive theme. *The Last Picnic* in particular demonstrates "that the picnics, which are a metaphor for an idyllic life, cannot survive unchanged in a world where change and practicality rule the day."⁶⁸ and how Landsbergis attempted to resolve the conflict of balancing cultures and traditions within his work⁶⁹, a blending employing the tools of an exilic artist.

The Last Picnic is similar to *A Bridge Across the Sea* and *It's Different Now, Mr. Abele* in entertaining topics that try to reframe the cultural trauma of Baltic exiles, the inevitability of change, and negotiating a way between the new and the old, with less controversy attached to it. The lack of controversy may perhaps be in part due to the lighter tone of the play and Landsbergis's cultivated personal style of mixing the theatre of the absurd, Brechtian epic theatre, and Lithuanian folklore⁷⁰, compared to the possibility of viewing Külvet's and Straumanis's plays as windows to the everyday family lives of exiles.

What all the plays have in common is the authorial proposition of new possibilities and the potential of Baltic exile identity, building *upon* the traumas of old, rather than remaining preoccupied by them. An openness to change, much more akin to what literary scholars at the time have noted to be the strength of the exilic artist and what Meerzon has later proposed as the true potential of the exile theatre.

Conclusion

As Silenieks concluded in his overview of Latvian exile literature in 1972, it was an era of change: "And so it seems permissible to view the present state of Latvian literature in exile as a transitional period: the exit of the old guard representing the era of the unresolved national trauma and the ushering in of harbingers of a looming evolution from adherence to pre-fabricated values to groping for certainties in a labyrinth of modern ambiguities"⁷¹. These notions describe not only the Latvian play examined within this study, but also can be applied to the Estonian and Lithuanian perspectives as well. The three plays selected for this study represent ways in which Baltic exiles in North America of the 60s and 70s could have navigated divergent paths from the vicissitudes of exile life focused on what was lost.

The aim of this study was in no means to present the selected works as self-help plays for exiles or as admonishments against representations of cultural trauma, but rather to highlight a crossroads in narratives prevalent at the time, in which Baltic exile communities were faced with, by then, decades *since* the loss of their homelands and decades *within* a society that was also undergoing dramatic shifts. The three works represent a conscious desire for change within Baltic exile literatures and theatre scenes, which had largely focused on the preservation of allowing only specific ways to discuss exile, a focus preoccupied by cultural trauma. With fewer and fewer professional theatre-makers, the need to adapt beyond cultural trauma was of particular significance.

While naming and declaring this trauma within the arts served its purpose in highlighting the injustice of the occupation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (the notion ultimately being at the core of the selected works as well), the themes of the plays by Külvet, Straumanis, and

65 Bankauskaitė, Huber 2021.

66 Daubenas 1974, V.

67 Bankauskaite, Huber 2021, 319.

68 op. cit., 320.

69 op. cit, 321.

70 op. cit, 26.

71 Silenieks 1972.

Landsbergis suggested something new for Baltic exile theatre to explore. Within the Estonian and Latvian examples, there was a clear call for theatre to discuss more controversial topics of exile in order to avoid exile theatre from enclosing itself to only specific themes guarded by cultural trauma. The Lithuanian example touches upon the same themes, recurring ones for the author himself, that of overcoming traumas of the past, and is an example from the authors' established style that already blends the old and the new, gaining interest beyond the exile community. The selected works were not the first or the only examples to suggest change or even bring controversy, but are emblematic in representing the shift in Baltic exile discourse in the 70s.

In *Performing Exile, Performing Self*, Yana Meerzon concludes: "Theater of exile – always self-referential and thus self-ironic – builds upon the exilic artist's self-alienated gaze, which provides him/her with the space for commentary, for the reconciliation of a past left behind with a present to be understood and conquered. As such, theatre of exile must be rendered cosmopolitan, built by an exilic artist, the citizen of the world."⁷² In the case of these three plays, a desire towards a more cosmopolitan potential is evident not only in the intent to engage Anglophone audiences by translation and providing background information upon publication, but also through crossing boundaries set by the cultural traumas of the community and reflecting on societal changes in American society of the time.

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⁷² Meerzon 2012, 302.

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