

Actors as Co-Creators in Contemporary Latvian Theatre Aesthetical and Social Aspects

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ABSTRACT

In Latvian theatre, the last decade has been a time of significant changes regarding the working methods of independent theatre movements. Two of the oldest independent theatres in Riga – *Dirty Deal Teatro* and *Gertrūde Street Theatre* – have become a centre for various theatre productions, therefore moving towards the model of state repertoire theatres. Meanwhile, in recent years, several new theatre companies and creative groups have appeared in the field. Theatre troupe *KVADRIFRONS*, formed by four young actors having just graduated from the Latvian Academy of Culture, as well as the theatre company *esARTe*, led by director and teacher Elmārs Seņkovs and the ‘scandalous’ young actors trained in the so-called puppet theatre course at the Latvian Academy of Culture, – these are just a few examples of the new creative formations in Latvian theatre. While in repertoire theatre the creative process mostly lies on the shoulders of the stage director, the aforementioned theatre companies highlight the importance of the actor as co-creator – both in the artistic (devised theatre methods), and the administrative process (actors as managers, etc.). Has the profession of actor changed from performer to administrator? How does the administrative status of the newly founded theatre companies influence the work of freelance actors? How has the status of the actor changed in today’s society? The research tackles the topic of actor as co-creators focusing on the examples and experiences of new independent Latvian theatre companies and including significant social, as well as aesthetical aspects.

KEYWORDS

actor, devised theatre, independent theatre movement, freelance artists, contemporary theatre

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Aesthetical and Social Aspects

Overall, in European theatre, the twentieth Century can be described as the era of the stage director. As pointed out by the Russian modernist theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold (*Всеволод Мейерхольд*), the director's "position is solid, because unlike the actor he knows (or should know) what the show will look like tomorrow. He is obsessed by the *whole*, and thus stronger than the actor."¹ In dramatic theatre, the actor's task is "to act not in his own name, but on behalf of the character he imitates or pretends to be."² The actor embodies a dramatic character and therefore is meant to "transform his sensual body into a semiotic one which would serve as a material carrier for textual meaning. All physical aspects that exaggerated, falsified, abused, undermined, or altered its meaning in any way were to be eliminated."³ At the same time, as pointed out by the French theatre scholar Patrice Pavis, the actor is "at the very heart of the theatrical event; he is the living connection between the author's text (dialogue and stage directions), the director's instructions, and the spectators' attentive perceptions ..."⁴

The primary concern of actors from the west is to act not in his own name, but on behalf of the character he imitates or pretends to be, thus creating "the illusion of embodying an individual"⁵. At the same time, in the course of theatre history, in various theatre techniques, schools, or systems the tasks and means of expression of the actor differ – from the psychological techniques of the "Stanislavsky system", to the "Alienation effect" (*Der Verfremdungseffekt*) of the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, from the demolition of any rules or borders between the performer and spectator in the practice of Performance art since 1960s, to the freedom of acting techniques and styles in the various forms of the postdramatic theatre experience. However, as pointed out by the German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Fichte, despite the chosen aesthetic form, both generating and perceiving corporeality in performance depend on two phenomena in particular: processes of embodiment and the phenomenon of presence.⁶

Both of these aspects – the mimetic approach to the role, and the importance of actors' actual psychophysical presence on the stage *per se* – are also at the heart of contemporary Latvian theatre. In the twenty-first century, Latvian theatre is still mostly based on psychological theatre traditions rooted in the Russian psychological theatre school. However, the newest generations of theatre artists are inclined to combine psychological and performative theatre approaches, thus creating stage productions where the actor/actress is not only embodying a certain role, but also exhibiting himself/herself on the stage – both in the aspect of bodily presence and in the revealing of personal characteristics, world-views, memories, stories, etc.

1 Meyerhold 1963, 283.

2 Pavis 2003, 56.

3 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 78.

4 Pavis 2003, 57.

5 Pavis 2003, 56-57.

6 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 77.

While globally, the phenomenon of actor as co-creator in the theatrical process is well used, in Latvian theatre, the dominating theatre-making practice is still to use the actor's talent in a traditional way. That is to say, through the dramatic interpretation of the role under the strong guidance of the stage director as the author of the performance.

While the practice of the actor as co-creator can be traced throughout the history of Western theatre, the context of contemporary theatre invites us to think about several problematic questions.

On the one hand, Patrice Pavis speaks of the emancipation of the actor and links this concept to the overall "return to the actor and a collective conception of performances comprising extra-theatrical materials (reportage, collage of texts, gestural improvisation, etc.)."⁷ Furthermore, Pavis stresses that actors claim their share of creativity and that the performance thus loses its "fetishistic nature as a monument and becomes a series of entertaining moments."⁸ With theatre language becoming more and more open and metatheatrical, the actor has gained unprecedented freedom on the stage that allows the exploration of both physical and psychological techniques as well as means of expression. However, sometimes this freedom compromises the quality of the stage production (for example, in the case when actors create the performance text and the production themselves, without the help of a professional playwright and stage director). As pointed out by Pavis, in some cases, the term *performer* even goes beyond the concept of *actor*: "A performer is someone who speaks and acts on his own behalf (as an artist and as a person) and thus addresses the audience, while the actor represents his character and pretends to know he is only a theatre actor. The performer stages his own self, while the actor plays the role of another."⁹

In current Latvian theatre, there is an active ongoing discussion about the translational options for the English language term 'performer'¹⁰. As stressed by Pavis, in contemporary theatre, "the term performer, as opposed to actor, is being used increasingly (...) so as to insist on the action accomplished by the actor, rather than the mimetic representation of a role. For it is above all the performer who is physically and psychically present in front of the spectators."¹¹ Therefore the growing creative freedom of the actor influences the need for change in theatre theory as well.

On the other hand, in the twenty-first century theatre, especially in the context of the growing influence of modern technologies and visual dramaturgy, the actors place in the hierarchy of the theatre system sometimes becomes challenged. Similarly, like at the beginning of the twentieth century when the cinema made its first appearance, in the twentieth century, theatre has to redefine its *essence* and perhaps return to the roots that define theatre as an art genre – the undisturbed energy of the actor on the stage that is being transmitted to the spectator. With video projections, dominating set design elements, etc., the actor accordingly sometimes has to regain the dominating place in the sign system on the stage drawing attention to the live body and live emotions in the world of digital media.

Furthermore, the social status of the actor has changed, also. In Latvian theatre, more and more young actors are forced or deliberately decide to choose a freelance status, without being tied to a large repertoire theatre troupe and therefore moving from one project to another. While the actors that have made an appearance at popular large stage productions or, especially, commercial TV series, gain fame and influence in society, young actors who work in independent small theatre projects have to work hard in order to get noticed by stage directors, theatre managers, or large audiences. This generates a complex dilemma: while the creative freedom of the actor allows to explore new theatre forms and talents, the financial and organizational aspects sometimes make it hard for young actors to survive as freelance artists.

One can conclude that in contemporary theatre the changes of the actor's status can be linked to both an artistic and organizational (institutional) turn, therefore the author of the article

7 Pavis 1998, 13.

8 Ibid.

9 Pavis 1998, 262.

10 In the Latvian language, there is only one word – 'aktieris', and the distinction between the terms 'actor' and 'performer' in this case is not applicable.

11 Pavis 2003, 58.

tackles this problem in both a social and creative discourse.

Actor as co-author

Despite the never-ending debates about the eventual freedom of the actor in the creating process of the role, in most cases, the director is still in control of the framework of each individual role and the performance as a whole. This generally leaves the actor the task of bringing the role to life after the instructions of the director – by using such technical tools as gestures, mimics, voice, etc., and filling it with emotional and psychological content. However, as pointed out by Alison Oddey, professor of visual culture and contemporary performance, in the model of *devised theatre* the creative process of making theatre “enables a group of performers to be physically and practically creative in the sharing and shaping of an original product that directly emanates from assembling, editing, and re-shaping individuals’ contradictory experiences of the world. There is a freedom of possibilities for all those involved to discover; an emphasis on a way of working that supports intuition, spontaneity, and an accumulation of ideas.”¹² The growing importance of the creative freedom of the actor in the model of *devised theatre* is also becoming a more and more common tendency in Latvia, and this working method is connected to several psychological, social, as well as aesthetical aspects that need to be mentioned in the context of Latvian theatre practice.

From a psychological (individual) point of view, the *devised theatre* method demands the actor to be fully on-board with the overall idea (message) and form (aesthetics) of the performance. In most cases of Latvian *devised theatre* practice, the stage director carefully chooses like-minded actors and other artists in order to form a united creative team. The creative process invites the actor to share and communicate, that is, to contribute (intellectually or physically) ‘material’ for the performance as a collective work of art. Moreover, during the last few years, in Baltic theatre, there has been a strong turn towards *autobiographical or self-revelatory performances*. The emphasis on self-revelation on the stage allows the actor to become personally involved in the process of the performance: share his/her memories, personal life experience, thoughts, worries, etc. The practice of autobiographical theatre is also connected to the concept of therapeutic art. As explained by researchers Susana Pendzik, Renée Emunah, and David Read Johnson, self-revelatory theatre can be therapeutic (with the aim of personal growth), or nontherapeutic (the aim is primary artistic, educational, or advocacy)¹³. However, devised theatre practice is not always autobiographical, allowing the actor to reflect on various topics, as well as to try new aesthetic techniques and tools.

Meanwhile, from a social point of view, the concept of co-creation in the devised theatre model creates an inner community – despite the genre, aesthetics and themes of the production, the actor becomes a member of a team that works in close collaboration to reach the goal – create a performance. Co-creation as a work method allows the creative team to build a strong bond, therefore the artistic process can develop in close collaboration leaving less responsibility on the shoulders of the stage director. Furthermore, the notion of co-creation is a sign of mutual respect between the actors ensemble - in the structure of the performance, the lack of “big” or “small” roles makes all the actors equal.

Taking into account the psychological and social context, the tendency of co-creation also allows the exploration of various aesthetic possibilities – from the means of expression of physical theatre to verbatim theatre practice; from creating a performance with a textual script to putting emphasis on improvisation; from performances with a few performers on the stage, to large scale productions. The unifying aspect is the actor’s participation in the devising of the performance aesthetics.

In Latvian theatre, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the ‘metropolis’ of the devised theatre or co-creation practice was New Riga Theatre, lead by Alvis Hermanis. Maija Treile, a Latvian theatre critic, states that “from the 2003/2004 programmatic season of New Riga Theatre, until 2010 the troupe turned to the collective or co-creation method when the actors found the dramaturgical material themselves - before the rehearsal process, while interviewing Latvian people, as well as working with the etudes method. Therefore the practice of New Riga

12 Oddey 1996, 1.

13 Pendzik & Emunah 2017, 2.

Theatre expanded the limits of the professional horizon of the actors, exploring the fields of human studies, historical researching and dramaturgy.¹⁴

One of the quintessential examples of the co-creation practice is the monoproduction "Grandfather". In 2009, Vilis Daudziņš, a talented actor of New Riga Theatre, created a documentary monoproduction whose starting point was the personal intention of actor Vilis Daudziņš to trace out his grandfather who went missing after World War Two. During his search, the actor encountered a few men with the same family name as his grandfather – Savickis, and the different life stories became material for a very personal performance. The making of the performance consisted of two stages: (1) collecting the material – interviews with different soldiers of World War Two, each representing a different side, political views, or position towards the war; (2) creating the form of the performance – the composition where the first monologue is performed by a legionnaire, the second – by a red partisan, the third – by a man who had to fight both in the Soviet and the German armies. The monologues on the stage are connected by personal comments of the actor Vilis Daudziņš as a documentary person who has observed these three stories during interviews and is now standing in front of the audience and is authorized to tell them. As observed by theatre critic Zane Radzobe, the characters of the performance appear as surprisingly honest – both in what is said in words, and what is told indirectly, because "V. Daudziņš has managed to embody their human contradictions both as an actor and as an author of the material."¹⁵ When talking about the making of this stage production, the actor reveals that the idea and the material were his own initiative, meanwhile, the composition was made by the director: "I only offered the material to Alvis when I had two fragments – the radical one and the normal *middle-way*. He said: "Let's do it, however, something is missing, most likely, a red partisan. (...) In the context of this production, Alvis only fought for the laconicism (on the stage), so that nothing would interfere with the story."¹⁶

In the last twenty years, the actors of New Riga Theatre have challenged and redefined the functions of the actor, emphasizing the idea of actor as a total co-creator of the stage production as a collective art form. In 2003, Alvis Hermanis stressed that "the technologies that actors possess have to be radically changed. The monopoly on the imitation of reality that theatre previously owned has slipped out of our hands. In order to make contact with the spectator, we have to search for new levels of credibility."¹⁷ From 2003 to 2010, in collaboration with his actors, Alvis Hermanis created the so-called *Latvian performance cycle* which offered an anthropological approach to the topic of Latvian nationality and Latvians, as well as changing the status of the actor in the creative process. The *Latvian cycle* consisted of around 10 performances (to mention a few – the *Latvian Stories*, *Latvian Love*, *Black Milk*, etc.) all of which were made in close collaboration with the actor's ensemble. During the summer holidays, the director gave actors creative assignments – to observe life situations and human behaviour, find prototypes, collect interviews, press materials, etc., and to transform ordinary Latvian life-stories into colourful stage characters. The actors in the annotations of these stage productions are noted as "performers", as well as the authors of the performance – not only on a textual level but also as co-creators of the performance as a whole. Most of the *Latvian cycle performances* are made by combining a series of etudes created by the actors themselves, creatively exploring a topic, theme, or problem. Alvis Hermanis has stated: "Etudes are the fundament of theatre. Similarly, like a sentence is the fundament of literature. Collecting etudes is a technique with which I have been working all my stage director's life."¹⁸ In the *devised theatre* model, the stage director becomes the *engineer* of the performance composition and philosophy, while the actors provide the *raw material* from which to build the production as a whole. Since 2010, the theatre of Alvis Hermanis has strongly influenced the working methods of several younger theatre-makers, introducing the *devised theatre* experience as a stable tendency in Latvian contemporary theatre, allowing the actor to gain more psychological, as well as aesthetical freedom.

14 Uzula-Petrovska (Treile) 2015, 303-4.

15 Radzobe 2009.

16 Daudziņš 2011.

17 Verhoustinska 2003, 33.

18 Hermanis 2016, 29.

The *etude technique* is commonly used when the creative team consists of like-minded theatre artists, starting their work from scratch and building the stage action around an idea instead of from an already existent literary text. The aforementioned theatre scholar Alison Oddey points out: “Devised theatre is an alternative to the dominant literary theatre tradition, which is the conventionally accepted form of theatre dominated by the often patriarchal, hierarchical relationship of playwright and director. (...) and challenges the prevailing ideology of one person’s text under another person’s direction. (...) and here is that the emphasis has shifted from the writer to the creative artist.”¹⁹ Moreover, she stresses that “the significance of this form of theatre is in the emphasis it places on an eclectic process requiring innovation, invention, imagination, risk, and above all, an overall group commitment to the developing work.”²⁰

Such, for example, was the case of the stage production *The Grimms* (“Grimmi”) – a performance made after the motifs of the fairytales of the Brothers Grimm in Liepāja Theatre (2022). At the beginning of the rehearsal process, stage director Elmārs Senkovs gave the young actors of Liepāja Theatre a task to read the fairy-tale book, choose a plot that sparked the imagination, and build an etude around it. During the creative process, the most successful etudes grew into larger scenes, and the dramaturgy (performance script), set and lighting design, costumes, and even music were created on the spot, while watching the improvisations of the young actors.

One has to agree with Alvis Hermanis who has declared that the “etude is always a small, miniature performance, which gives logic, meaning, and precision to the whole production.”²¹ In such cases, the result – the finished stage production – can definitely be defined as a collective work in which the most important sources are the imagination, improvisation, and technical skills of the actor as a co-creator.

Actor as a documentary person on the stage

Since the emergence of *devised theatre* practice in New Riga Theatre, several new generations of actors and stage directors have entered Latvian theatre, in many ways expanding and modifying the concept of actor as co-creator. As pointed out by Alison Oddey, “devising is a process of making theatre that enables a group of performers to be physically and practically creative in the sharing and shaping of an original product that directly emanates from assembling, editing, and re-shaping individuals’ contradictory experiences of the world. There is a freedom of possibilities for all those involved to discover; an emphasis on a way of working that supports intuition, spontaneity, and an accumulation of ideas.”²² These principles are also at the heart of the stage directing of Valters Sīlis.

Whether working in state repertoire theatres or in independent projects, Sīlis generally builds his performances as collective collages of ideas, images, concepts, and themes, emphasizing the personal interest and contribution of each individual actor as a part of the end result. Furthermore, in Sīlis’ stage productions, the actors are usually not bound to mimetically portray one single role but are constantly changing their visual image and psychophysical expressions, therefore fulfilling the idea of actor as a performer and co-creator of the theatrical process. While the traditional communication form in theatre is from the playwright (via stage director and actors) to the spectator, in the case of Sīlis stage productions, the creative team works in such close collaboration that this communication scheme changes completely, and the actor becomes not only the co-creator of his own role, but also of the performance as a whole. For example, in the performance “The Forest Brother” (staged both in Lithuanian (2015) and Latvian National Theatres (2016)), the actors as performers play out a story of the ‘last’ forest brother by offering a collective interpretation of the historic events from today’s point of view. Consequently, the principle of collective creation was used in the performance “Under two flags” (2019, Latvian National Theatre) dedicated to the Latvian rock group *Jumprava*. “The production is a peculiar chronicle of the existence of the group *Jumprava* – an artistic reconstruction, which is played by an ensemble of nine actors without a strict, constant division

19 Oddey 1996, 4.

20 op. cit., 2.

21 Hermanis 2016, 29.

22 Oddey 1996, 1.

of roles in the representation of very specific members of the group. (...) However, the emphasis is not so much on individualized images as on the representation of the group as a whole and the symbol,"²³ concludes theatre critic Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča. Therefore, the production focuses not on the individual performance of each actor in a role, but on the process of collective creation as an aesthetic and symbolic act.

In Valters Sīlis stage directing, the shift from actor embodying a dramatic character to a performer who creates meaning just by being on the stage is both an aesthetic, as well as a social act. For example, a *migrating* element in the stage productions of Valters Sīlis is the character of the author – sometimes anonymous, sometimes a character with a concrete prototype, he is present on the stage, comments the action and becomes a symbolic alter-ego of the stage director or playwright (for example, in the cases when Valters Sīlis collaborated with playwright Jānis Balodis). The actor in these cases does not embody a living character, but becomes a symbolic voice from backstage, therefore creating a link between theatre and life, imagination and reality.

As theatre critic Undīne Adamaite points out, the stage productions of Sīlis usually stress the importance of civil responsibility for improving the quality of life, as well as various sustainability scenarios, thus, needless to say, not the values of the consumer society: "In the performances of Valters Sīlis and his like-minded playwright Jānis Balodis, they often become such life experts themselves - both as people and as actors. The method of Valters Sīlis is a completely free collage. Yet, unlike the aesthetics of postmodern theater, the eclectic montage is created with a clear pathos of higher meaning and a missionary passion that often borders on didactics."²⁴ In many ways, Valters Sīlis in his stage productions has broadened the tasks of the actors – both by combining elements of psychological and postdramatic/performative theatre practices, and by emphasizing the self-sufficiency of the actor's presence on the stage.

Actors as (self)managers and the social status of freelance actors

The aforementioned examples of actor as co-creator refer to the experience of large state repertoire theatres and the aesthetic strategies of individual Latvian stage directors who have developed the principle of co-creation as an artistic practice. At the same time, in contemporary Latvian theatre, the concept of actors as co-creators is much broader, representing not only the aesthetic, but also institutional and social changes.

From the viewpoint of aesthetic changes, contemporary theatre has broadened the perception of borders between various theatre professions, such as actors, directors, set and costume designers, choreographers, etc. For example, in Latvian theatre, there is a strong new generation of choreographers, blurring the borders between the functions of the stage director and choreographer and creating the discussion about the term "movement director". Meanwhile, returning to the broadening of the functions of the actor, in Latvian theatre, there are more and more actors who try their hand in the field of directing, playwriting, costume or set design, composing, etc. In these cases, one can speak not only of the actor's need to express his/her talent in another theatre profession but also of the creative nature of theatre making process where the borders between different professions and their tasks tend to blur. In many cases, the actor becomes a part of the creative team by sharing and exploring his interests – whether it is the creation of the dramatic text, costume design, music score, set design, etc. For example, actor Artūrs Dīcis from Daile Theatre has become one of the leading Latvian playwrights by exploring witty stage dialogues. He writes plays that have been staged both in large repertoire and project theatres and has won two national awards as the *Best playwright of the season*; meanwhile, the actress, Madara Botmane, has developed a parallel career as a costume designer and in 2020 received an award as *Best Costume Designer* at the National Theatre Award ceremony *Performer's Night*. Many actors combine (or at some point in their career have combined) their main duties in large repertoire theatres with staging performances in different theatres (notable examples include such actors-directors as Ināra Slucka, Inga Tropa, Daiga Kažociņa, Kristīne Krūze, Kārlis Krūmiņš, and Intars Rešetins). Moreover, three of the largest Latvian state-funded theatres – Latvian National Theatre, Daile Theatre, and

23 Mellēna 2019.

24 Adamaite 2015, 247.

the Riga Russian Theatre – are currently led by actors in the managing directors' chair²⁵. Considering the relativity of the borders between different theatre professions, perhaps this is a signal to re-think and re-define the functions of the actor in contemporary theatre.

From an institutional, as well as social point of view, the tendency of actors becoming (self) managers is connected to the overall organizational and financial processes in Latvian theatre. While large state repertoire theatres (for example, Latvian National Theatre, Daile Theatre, New Riga Theatre, Mikhail Chekhov's Riga Russian Theatre) offer the actors the chance to become a part of the troupe, more and more actors choose the lifestyle of freelance artists, moving on from one project to another.

Since the outbreak of the *Covid-19* pandemic, the discussion about the pros and cons of working in state-funded or independent (project) theatres has become even more significant, especially considering the economic and psychological consequences of the pandemic, that has challenged the possibilities for freelance actors to find new work offers and financial support due to the changing of the epidemiological situation in the country and in theatres. Sandis Runge, a member of the graduates of Latvian Academy of Culture, currently working in Valmiera Drama Theatre, a regional theatre 100km outside of Riga, confesses: "Looking back now, we (the young actor's course of Valmiera Theatre) were very lucky that the theatre took us under its wing, otherwise we might have been left out of sight due to the pandemic."²⁶ Ilva Centere, a young actress who has tried out both working in Latvian National Theatre, and as a freelancer in several theatre projects, stresses the importance of the actor's creative and emotional freedom: "Actors in state theatres have the hardest time accepting what they are offered. Each actor has personal goals, a range of feelings that he needs to express right now, and sometimes the role, theme or setting given by the director does not match the individual wishes of the actor."²⁷ Meanwhile, Marija Linarte, a young actress who for several years lived the life of a freelancer, and then was offered a place in the actor's troupe of New Riga Theatre, gives an overall comparison of the two work models in Latvia: "As a freelancer, you control your own time, which is a big bonus. You decide for yourself what you will do. (...) There are changes all the time, you're not settled in one place but move about and learn to work with different people instead of one stable "family". (...) Of course, it's a jungle. (...) The one who would go and do it first, would get (the job). (...) Nobody has a duty to offer you a job. You're forced to do more. I think, because of this situation, such a miracle as KVADRIFRONS has happened."²⁸

In current Latvian theatre, more and more new theatre troupes and groups are being established and founded. Meanwhile, the oldest 'independent' theatres in Riga are also working as small repertoire theatres, receiving funds from the state. Therefore, although the freelance actors aren't given such social guaranties as in the troupes of large state-funded theatres, being a member of an independent theatre group offers its advantages.

Theatre as a "commune"

In the context of expanding the functions of the actor, in Latvian theatre, one of the most interesting case studies is KVADRIFRONS – an independent theatre troupe founded in 2017 by a team of talented young actors: Ance Strazda, Klāvs Mellis, Reinis Boters, and Āris Matesovičs. The name KVADRIFRONS symbolizes "change, duality and an everlasting journey through the unknown. The name of the group represents a viewpoint that is all-encompassing in both time and space."²⁹ In Latvian current theatre, the name KVADRIFRONS has become a symbol of a unified theatre experience where the borders between different theatre professions, as well as the creative process and theatre management have become irrelevant.

The members of KVADRIFRONS have stressed that the independent status of the troupe was an artistic choice – in order to work exclusively in collaboration with like-minded people, however, it has also affected the institutional side of the creative process. In her article about

25 Managing director of Latvian National Theatre – actor Jānis Vimba, Daile Theatre – Juris Žagars, Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre – Dana Bjorka.

26 Auziņa 2022.

27 Auziņa 2020.

28 Linka 2019.

29 *Kvadrifrons webpage 20.12.2022.*

KVADRIFONS, theatre critic Līga Ulberte points out that the case of this company brings to attention the widely-held prejudice that work in state-funded theatre (and therefore with a regular, monthly salary) is a general expectation among young actors. The critic points out that “in the last year of their studies, they were often discussed (sarcastically) as ‘poor little things’ who were not preliminarily engaged to any of the (state) theatres.”³⁰

For theatre troupe KVADRIFONS, the main source of finance are project grants from the State Culture Capital Foundation. Moreover, while the actors’ troupes of state repertoire theatres only have to be concerned about the artistic process, the actors of KVADRIFONS themselves take care of production and management processes. Two of the troupe – Klāvs Mellis and Reinis Boters – have also studied stage directing at the Latvian Academy of Culture and are currently combining both acting and stage directing tasks. The literary texts for the stage productions are usually created by the creative team themselves.

The cooperation of the actors has also shaped the aesthetics of their performances. In most stage productions of KVADRIFONS, the actors do not embody the roles of other individuals, but mostly address the spectators without the mediation of a fictive character. The actors of KVADRIFONS, for the most part, call each other by their real names and address issues close to their world views, such as the phenomenon of Fake News³¹, the relationships between the Latvian and Russian community³², grandchildren and their grandmothers³³, pupils and teachers³⁴, etc. In comparison to the traditional dramatic theatre experience, as commented by Klāvs Mellis, actor, playwright, stage director, and member of the troupe KVADRIFONS, “the stage director makes the performance, and the actor creates the role. The actor understands that is only normal to step aside and do your job, trying to adapt to the overall context and conception, and not to adjust everything to your own taste, understanding, or ambitions. (...) The case of KVADRIFONS is a little bit different because here the first impulse has always come from us. It places more responsibility on everyone, but also gives more influence over the process and the outcome.”³⁵

The personal approach to the story and the merging of theatre and other art forms creates the unique handwriting of this theatre troupe which is a clear manifestation of the actor’s creative freedom. At the same time, being together for many years, “these actors have played together so much that they feel each other with their backs,”³⁶ points out theatre critic Līga Ulberte. Therefore, although being defined as an independent theatre, KVADRIFONS is actually functioning as an open-minded repertoire theatre inviting other artists and actors to play or create stage productions, however, the core of the theatre troupe remains the same. Comparing their status to the large repertoire theatre troupes, such as New Riga Theatre, Klāvs Mellis stresses the importance of the common goal – trying to reach the “truly indefinable, ideal theatre”. “The team of New Riga Theatre is large, and perhaps the big team really a visionary leader, like (Alvis) Hermanis. We are relatively small, therefore I very much hope that we can do without such a leader,”³⁷ Mellis comments on 2019.

It is also significant that the company first made its home in the former Riga Circus building which is now under reconstruction, and the troupe has moved to another abandoned building – the former Faculty of Physics, Mathematics, and Optometry of the University of Latvia. The temporality of theatre space is a choice that has been made by several new theatre troupes and companies. For example, stage director Elmārs Seņkovs together with members of the *so-called* puppet theatre course just recently graduated from the Latvian Academy of Culture has founded his theatre company *ESARTE*, which is a collective without a solid home. In some ways this, of course, is a choice influenced by the lack of funding, however, it has become quite a symbolic sign of the instability of theatre as an institutional art form, and of the growing

30 Ulberte 2018.

31 Stage production *Fake News*, director Klāvs Mellis, 2019.

32 Stage production *LV vs RU*, director Reinis Boters, 2019.

33 Stage production *Grandmothers’ State*, director Paula Pļavniece, 2019.

34 Stage productions *Passive Tense*, director Klāvs Mellis, 2021; TAG, director Reinis Boters, 2022.

35 Lorence 2019.

36 Ulberte 2018.

37 Lorence 2019.

importance of creative collectiveness, especially during the time of the pandemic.

Despite the never-ending debates about the eventual freedom of the actor in the creative process of the role, in most cases, the director is still in control of the framework of each individual role and the performance as a whole. However, nowadays, the functions of the actor have broadened and far exceed the task of embodying a single role via instructions of the playwright and director.

In the devised theatre model, the actor becomes a co-creator of the stage production, gaining creative freedom both on an individual level (sharing personal experience, memories, thoughts, creating individual etudes), as well as on a collective level (becoming a part of the creative team). Therefore, in the process of co-creation, the hierarchical structures between actors in leading and supporting roles, as well as the canonical functions of the stage director and actor are expanding.

Such, for example, is the case of Alvis Hermanis and the actor's troupe of New Riga Theatre. Hermanis built his concept of the ideal theatre on the idea of actors as co-creators, exploring various theatre techniques, such as etude making, story-telling, documentary theatre etc. During the period between 2003 and 2010, the actors were given tasks to seek material and create etudes for several performances becoming co-creators of both the text and the physical action. Each production made in collaboration with the actors' ensemble was dedicated to a specific topic, such as the stories of ordinary Latvians, the extinction of the Latvian countryside, the personality of Latvian poet Imants Ziedonis and the motifs of his poetry, and so on. From today's perspective, the overall impact of this artistic process was both artistically and pedagogically strategic. On the one hand, Hermanis created a series of productions that were united by the aesthetical (etudes as a part of the production structure) and documentary (material from real live experiences) approach. On the other hand, this experience allowed the gradual creation of an ensemble that was able to work more individually, without concrete instructions from the stage director. This manifested, for example, in the recent stage production *Žižek. Peterson. Duel of the Century* (2022) - a performance where the actors, Vilis Daudziņš and Kaspars Znotiņš, play out the ideological clash between two of the most prominent contemporary public intellectuals: Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian philosopher and critic of neoliberalism and political correctness, versus Jordan Peterson, a Canadian clinical psychology doctor. The creative process, as well as the production itself is based on the individual research carried out by each actor, with only minor *artistic strokes* from the stage director.

Another theatre field emphasizing the importance of the actor as co-creator are autobiographical performances where the creators (including actors) are invited to share their personal experience, including therapeutic elements in the theatre making process, or drawing the attention of the audience to socially, economically, politically important topics. For example, in the case of Latvian theatre director Valters Sīlis, the actor becomes a co-creator both in the documentary research process and the staging process of the stage production. Most of Sīlis' stage productions resemble a collective collage of ideas, images, concepts, and themes, emphasizing the personal interest and contribution of each individual actor as a part of the end result. The actors are constantly changing their visual image and psychophysical expressions, therefore fulfilling the idea of actor as a performer and co-creator of the theatrical process. Some of Sīlis' performances, such as *The Forest Brother* (Lithuanian National Theatre, 2015; Latvian National Theatre, 2016), *Under two flags* (Latvian National Theatre, 2019), offer a collective interpretation of the historic events from today's point of view, allowing both the actors and the spectators to create a personal bond to the topics discussed on the stage.

Besides aesthetical and organizational tendencies, the notion of actor as co-creator can be furthermore explored and discussed in an institutional context. In Latvian theatre, there are still on-going discussions about the pros and cons of being a freelance actor. However, with the number of newly educated actors and other artists still growing, more and more theatre artists decide to form their own freelance groups and troupes. For example, in the context of Latvian theatre, the experience of the theatre troupe, KVADRIFRONS, is unique as the actors takes responsibility not only for the artistic but also the institutional process, becoming self-managers

and leading a functioning small repertoire theatre.

All the aspects tackled in this article lead us to a general question: does the definition of the profession “actor” need to be re-written?

AUTHOR

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