

Performances that Disappeared

Two Case Studies of Alternative Aesthetics during the Transition Period in Latvia in the late 1980s

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the alternative theatre and performance culture of the late 1980s in Latvia focusing on two independent companies that were established in 1987, namely The Experimental Theatre Studio led by theatre director Ilmārs Elerts and The Theatre Studio No. 8 uniting young theatre makers who refused to join the dominant state-funded repertory theatres. Both companies existed only for a few years and their activities and impact on Latvian theatre have not been properly researched until now. The article suggests negotiating the inherited strict binary division in research between professional and non-professional or semi-professional theatre, as well as official and underground culture in case of artistically innovative practices and recognizing the rhizomatic nature of Latvian theatre processes. Both companies are remarkable because of their significantly different aesthetics from the mainstream Latvian theatre of the time. They could be regarded as performative transgressions in terms of both aesthetic choices and organizational models.

KEYWORDS

Experimental Theatre Studio, Theatre Studio No. 8, Ilmārs Elerts, Modris Tenisons, independent theatre, transgression, transition period

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Introduction

The article is part of a wider research project about the transition period in Latvian theatre during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This period of fast political and social changes in the post-Soviet countries was also characterized by enthusiasm and curiosity in the art world to re-establish itself in the context of Western artistic culture. During the *perestroika* and *glasnost* period (1985–90) in the USSR, it became easier to travel abroad, formerly hidden and forbidden information became available, and new forms of management were introduced. It inspired theatre makers to establish their own companies outside the highly institutionalized and controlled repertory theatre system. In the history of recent Latvian theatre, the theatre Kabata (The Pocket) is usually named as the first independent theatre.¹ “Kabata was called the first hopeful swallow, which was formally born in 1987 as an alternative to the existing system and operating with a loan from the Theatre Association of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic on premises in Old Town assigned by the Riga City Executive Committee.”² The notion of an independent theatre in this article is used to denote all theatres of any organisational form or aesthetic attempt that appear as private initiatives alongside state or municipal theatre institutions.

Kabata was an initiative of a group of graduates of theatre directing who “could not find jobs in the existing state theatres”³ and on a project basis involved professional actors in their performances. The highlighting of Kabata over other independent companies established around the same time stems from assumptions by theatre researchers that other groups were less professional and did not last long. During the Soviet period, theatre scholars strictly separated *professional* theatre from *non-professional* or *semi-professional* theatre practices, and performance activities taking place outside official theatre institutions were categorized as *amateur*. The notion of an amateur theatre in this article is used to denote theatre companies uniting people who like to practice theatre, but are not paid, and take part in theatre activities during their free time for their own enjoyment. Usually, such companies operate under the auspices of municipalities or educational institutions, for instance, universities. Professionalism was associated exclusively with established state repertory theatres, and only this domain gained the attention of critics and researchers. This preconception has not been fundamentally reviewed even in recent theatre research, and contemporary independent theatres in Latvia, to some extent, still suffer from underestimation just because of their status. Re-evaluation of the artistic heritage of the socialist period in Eastern European countries and re-contextualizing artistic practices often labelled as *underground* or amateur has been introduced, for instance,

1 Akots 2007, 570; Kalna 2010, 537; Kalna 2012, 179; Tišheizere 2020b, 104.

2 Akots 2007, 570.

3 Kreicberga 2021, 82.

regarding visual arts and interdisciplinary practices in Latvia⁴ and performance art in Eastern Europe⁵. The notion of the underground culture in this article is used to denote artistic and cultural activities that were held during the Soviet period outside any official institutional frameworks and associated with resistance to the Soviet occupation. However, the field of theatre research still ignores “that there was an avant-garde, alternative, progressive, non-conformist, experimental, laboratory – call it what you want – theatre in Latvia during the Soviet period, which could be compared with the post-war topical developments in world theatre, and which was closely associated with movements in other Eastern European countries. We haven’t even agreed on a proper name for it – it’s part of the debt.”⁶

This article will focus on two examples of alternative theatre and performance culture in Latvia during the transition period, namely, the theatre companies The Experimental Theatre Studio (ETS) and Theatre Studio No. 8 (TS8). Both are still underestimated and barely researched⁷ because of their marginal and unusual status not corresponding to the idea of a professional theatre. The article suggests that the overcoming of a binary division between professional and amateur theatre in research would help to recognize the rhizomatic nature of Latvian theatre and performance processes where people, ideas, approaches, and aesthetics are interconnected and migrate between different realms that inspire each other. It refers also, for instance, to the performance art in Latvia during the Soviet occupation which, though practised as an underground activity, nevertheless, involved professional artists who later incorporated these experiences into official culture. “In the context of theatre history, staged performances and thematic carnivals held in the 1970s are particularly significant, as their features can be seen twenty years later in the works of several scenographers.”⁸

The mutual influences between artificially separated spheres of official culture denominated as professional and so-called underground or amateur artistic practices require further research. To gather data for the research of the chosen phenomena the content analysis of published materials in printed media (articles, reviews, interviews), the visual material (photos) and Latvian theatre historiography was conducted, and the interviews with the involved persons were carried out.

Both examples could be defined as transgressive in accordance with the explanation of the notion by the sociologist Chris Jenks: “Transgression is always a step into the unknown and a step that is without precedent.”⁹ The fast-changing socio-political framework during *perestroika* triggered the official establishment of both – former underground theatres as in the case of the ETS, and the new initiatives looking for alternative aesthetics and operational models as in the case of the TS8. This article will examine these specific case studies via John Jervis’s explanation of the notion *transgressive*. Jervis proposes that the “transgressive is reflexive, questioning both its own role and that of the culture that has defined it in its otherness. (...) Transgression, unlike opposition or reversal, involves hybridization, the mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories. It is not, in itself, subversion; it is not an overt and deliberate challenge to the status quo. What it does do, though, is implicitly interrogate the law, pointing not just to the specific, and frequently arbitrary, mechanisms of power on which it rests – despite its universalizing pretensions – but also to its complicity, its involvement in what it prohibits.”¹⁰

The Context

During the Soviet occupation, the ruling power had occupied the field of theatre by insisting on the predominance of the method of psychological realism borrowed from Stanislavsky’s system. Similarly, “The only formally accepted and promoted method of theatre training during

4 See, for example, Astahovska & Vējš 2011 and Astahovska & Žeikare 2016.

5 See, for example, Bryzgel 2018.

6 Vējš 2021.

7 Kreicberga 2021, 84.

8 Tišheizere 2020a, 392.

9 Jenks 2003, 42.

10 Jervis 1999, 4.

the Soviet era was the Stanislavsky system.”¹¹ Other stylistic and aesthetic approaches usually raised suspicion and non-acceptance from the authorities. Transgressive theatre and performance practices, i.e., “reflexive, questioning both its own role and that of the culture that has defined it in its otherness”¹², were possible outside the official professional sector – within an amateur theatre and underground movements.¹³ The official theatre scene, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, erupted in some alternative aesthetic manifestations, for instance, in the practice of directors Māra Ķimele, Arnolds Liniņš, Pēteris Pētersons, Ādolfs Šapiro, often in collaboration with scenographers Ilmārs Blumbergs, Andris Freibergs, Kurts Fridrihsons, and visual and movement artist Modris Tenisons. It is worth noting that most of the mentioned artists also participated in amateur and underground movements. For instance, during the 1960s the abovementioned scenographers made the set designs for the Riga Pantomime, which affected their understanding of the abstract and space in theatre that they later applied in their groundbreaking professional theatre works giving rise to the development of a unique school of Latvian scenography. Some artists, for example, director Māra Ķimele, crossed back and forth between both areas; however, only her activities in the framework of the official culture have been researched.

It is important to acknowledge that the status of amateur theatre during the Soviet occupation in some cases was the only way to legally practice *otherness*. For example, the artistic director of the ETS Ilmārs Elerts (1948–1991) could not execute his ideas and methods within the institutional framework and established his own autonomous theatre group as amateur theatre where he could develop his theatrical approach. His contribution to the professional theatre – five performances in the Liepāja Theatre between 1984 and 1986 – were not considered remarkable and appear only as titles in the chronicle of the Latvian theatre history of the 1980s.¹⁴ Accordingly, the theatre practice of the Artistic Director of the ETS, Ilmārs Elerts, (1948–1991) has not been researched at all.

In 1987, a special decree on studio-theatres was issued in Moscow which allowed the official establishment of alternative theatres that would work commercially. This decree led to a boom of theatre studios in the USSR that was echoed in Latvia by the founding of several autonomous theatre groups including the ETS and the TS8. Through these case studies this article will explore how “[t]ransgression, unlike opposition or reversal, involves hybridization, the mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories.”¹⁵

Ilmārs Elerts and The Experimental Theatre Studio

The ETS grew out of the amateur theatre group led by the theatre director Ilmārs Elerts. During the Soviet period, he consistently worked outside the institutional theatre framework and developed his own theatre language which was much closer to the ideas of Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook¹⁶ than to the dominant psychological theatre of the time. The artistic path of Elerts could be defined by the resistance to and the *transgression* of the uniform understanding of theatre. He practised a different type of performance – a physical theatre that was searching for its roots in ancient Greek theatre, Commedia dell’arte, different forms of a puppet theatre, masks, and what Peter Brook would call the Rough Theatre.¹⁷ In an interview, Elerts characterized his artistic practice: “In the middle and the second half of the 1970s, we, a small group of like-minded people, began to look for a visually expressive, dynamic, colourful theatre that would not be a reflection of life, but instead – the creation of life, the creation of the life of theatre art. This happened while we searched for plots that criticized society. Speaking sharply about what is happening in society.”¹⁸

11 Kreicberga 2020, 77.

12 Jervis 1999, 4.

13 Some examples – Riga Pantomime and Ansis Rūtentāls’ Movement Theatre – have been at least partially researched (Vējš 2002); Rīgas pantomīma 2021.

14 Bērziņa 1995, 430–2.

15 Jervis 1999, 4.

16 Viktors Runtulis 21.4.2021.

17 Brook 1996, 78–119.

18 Lauksargs *Rīgas Balss* 3.6.1988.



Figure 1: Elerts_18: The portrait of Ilmārs Elerts at work in the 1980s

In the beginning of the 1970s Elerts was kicked out from acting studies at the Latvian State Conservatory because he made a dissident gesture – he lit a candle at the tombstone of the first president of the Latvian state, Jānis Čakste. Around 1974 he established a group of peers the core of which worked continuously together under different roofs and with often changing participants. The first phase was a movement theatre without any text. Elerts' wife Ingrīda Elerte remembers that the reason was not only the interest in alternative ways of expression to the dominant mode of psychological realism, but also because it was less subject to censorship – there was no literary material to be controlled and approved.¹⁹ They invented the genre of disco-performances to reach audiences in the 1970s. Movement sketches were performed before disco evenings, which became popular at the time. Ilmārs Elerts also staged literary works and plays frowned upon by officialdom like *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by Richard Bach and a début by the Latvian playwright Jānis Jurkāns *The Little Crane*.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Elerts studied theatre directing at the Leningrad State Institute of Culture officially establishing himself as a director. He graduated in 1983. His graduating piece was *The City*, an adaptation of Ingmar Bergman's play *Scenes from a Marriage*, which he staged in two versions – with professional actors of the Academic Drama Theatre Lāsma Kugrēna and Voldemārs Šoriņš and with actors of his troupe Ingrīda Elerte and Andris Smildziņš – to ensure more presentations of the performance. Consequently, he was invited as an in-house director to the Liepāja Theatre; however, theatre critics did not appreciate his work there. Regarding Elerts' fourth production at the Liepāja Theatre, critic Valda Čakare wrote: "*The Third Word* [by Alejandro Casona - ZK] is a watchable piece. Unlike Ilmārs Elerts's previous productions (*Dad on Order*, *Eighteenth Camel*, *Modern Marriage*), where even the logic of the events was impossible to trace, this time the director offers an illustrative, but clearly and unambiguously coherent performance, at least at the level of the plot."²⁰

While working at the state theatre in Liepāja, Elerts continued to run his own amateur company in Riga. Working inside the institutional structure of the state theatre Elerts was not able to transgress the rules. He felt much more freedom to experiment with his own company where he also ran daily workshops to train the actors. The group practised movement and improvisation rigorously four times a week or even every day when rehearsing a performance. Throughout his artistic practice, Elerts researched different theatre languages and often worked with previously unstaged and risky material. He was "questioning of the boundaries

19 Ingrīda Elerte 6.10.2022.

20 Čakare *Literatūra un Māksla* 28.3.1986.

that separate categories”²¹ as did the Riga Pantomime and Ansis Rūtentāls’ Movement Theatre at the same time. In 1986, Elerts characterized his studio thusly: “It is our work. Anything else is a hobby. It is an attempt to do the work of professionals with self-employed talent.”²² This quote demonstrates that he considered the practice of his *amateur* company as a *professional* work, not a hobby, even if the official status did not support it.



Figure 2: Elerts_10: The first version of Lorca’s *Power* directed by Ilmārs Elerts at the cultural house and disco club Dzintarpils (Amber Palace)

In the mid-1980s, the group stabilised its structure, and in 1985, under the title *Power*, Elerts staged Federico García Lorca’s unfinished *Play without a Title* supplemented with themes from his play *The Public*. This performance marked a new phase in the artistic practice of Elerts, as well as in the evolution of the collective. The play tackled “issues of class and ideological division, of intolerance and hatred, all of them acted out in a theatre where the actors are as much the audience as the audience – the actors.”²³ Elerts made the first version of the performance on stage at the cultural house and disco club Dzintarpils (Amber Palace). In 1987, he restaged the play as a site-specific and interactive performance in a café environment. The site-specific and interactive approach, treating spectators as participants of the performance was an innovative experiment in the context of Latvian theatre. The combination of a politically and socially trenchant, yet still poetic text, with unusually intimate acting which transgressed the borders of assigned roles made a powerful and memorable impression on the audience. As amateur theatre was mostly ignored by theatre critics, there are a lack of reviews describing the performance and its impact. I rely, therefore, on some interviews with eyewitnesses and on my own vague memories. I remember the overwhelming impression of a *different* theatre that certainly could be defined as *transgressive* in a sense that it “implicitly interrogate[d] the law”²⁴, i.e., the theatrical conventions of the time.

In 1986, Elerts staged Hermanis Paukšs’ adaptation of Charles de Coster’s *The Legend of Thyl Ulenspiegel* as a musical mask play with live music reminiscent of medieval outdoor performances played at market places. It was performed both indoors (for instance, at the State Puppet Theatre) and as an outdoor performance. Elerts took an unprecedented and fresh approach instead of a psychological interpretation of characters introducing a vehement physicality and imagery of *rough theatre*. The performance travelled to many Latvian cities under the name of Riga City Proletarian District Komsomol Youth Committee’s Youth Centre

21 Jervis 1999, 4.

22 Klotiņa *Padomju Jaunatne* 17.6.1986.

23 Edwards 2014, xxxv.

24 Jervis 1999, 4.

Experimental Theatre Studio because the company was established under its auspices.

During the 1980s, Elerts used every possibility to attach his company to an existing legal structure that could help maintain its existence. In 1988, the ETS had two premieres – Hermanis Paukšs' confrontational comedy *In the Shade of Pink Sails* and the tragicomedy *Jerks* by Lithuanian author Kazimieras Saja. The next performance – *Matiss, the Chief of Cups* (1989) after the poem of well-known Latvian poet Aleksandrs Čaks – “perhaps was the beginning of the ritual theatre”²⁵ as defined by one of the leading actors of the company Viktors Runtulis. From this point on, the productions of the ETS became more complicated and elaborate. They started to collaborate with scenographers, music composers and other artists. The exploration of performance as ritual continued in the next two performances – *The Witch of Riga* (1990) based on a play by Rainis, which was performed outdoors in the Dom Square as part of the national Song and Dance Festival, and *A Play with a Song of a Goat* (1991), which travelled to the Edinburgh Festival.

The special decree on studio-theatres issued in Moscow in 1987 allowed for the legal establishment of independent companies, and Elerts immediately used this chance. The next crucial question was a venue. The company was tired of the continuous search for places to perform. After the great success of guest performances of Lorca's *Power* in Moscow at the theatre studio Poor Yorick in 1988, the All-Union People's Creative and Cultural Education Scientific Methodical Center of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR asked the Soviet Latvian authorities “to find an opportunity to open a current account in the bank and to provide the theatre with a permanent venue.”²⁶ This did not work. Nevertheless, in 1989 the company found a home in the former fish factory Kaija (The Seagull), which was assigned to become a branch of the State Library. During the renovation phase, the library allowed the ETS to use its premises. The company set up a cosy theatre venue under the title The Obsessed House. However, they knew that this was a temporary offer, which lasted only for a year and a half.

Elerts's ETS developed as a sustainable economic model of operation as much as was possible at the time. In tandem with “serious plays”, they produced travelling children's performances and performed in big city festivities as a street theatre. This way they earned money that allowed them to produce other work and to pay actors and other members of the team. In some interviews, the representatives of the theatre proudly mention that they do not depend on any state subsidy. It seems that this position was of great importance to the company, as they wanted to perform independently without any obligations towards any authorities. This was a *transgressive* act “pointing not just to the specific, and frequently arbitrary, mechanisms of power on which it [the law - ZK] rests – despite its universalizing pretensions – but also to its complicity, its involvement in what it prohibits.”²⁷ Although the mechanisms of power of the Soviet state were shattered, however, the independent cultural initiatives claiming their autonomy faced difficulties which were a systemic part of the cultural policy still in development.

In 1991, the ETS was invited to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival with the production *A Play with a Song of a Goat*. Elerts had visited Edinburgh earlier and had gotten acquainted with the Scottish artist and promoter of visual and performing arts Richard Demarco who showed a great interest in his artistic practice. For many years Demarco had been promoting cultural links with Eastern European artists at his gallery, and he enthusiastically helped to organize the visit of the ETS to Edinburgh. Sadly, the sudden death of Ilmārs Elerts from a heart attack on 30 May 1991, left the performance unfinished. The actor Viktors Runtulis took over the leadership and the company performed several shows at the Edinburgh Fringe in August 1991. Besides *A Play with a Song of a Goat*, which was a mashup of Euripides' *Bacchae* and the Greek novel *Daphnis and Chloe*, they twice performed a puppet show and created *The Ritual of Latvian White Witches*, which was performed three times during the night in the central square of Edinburgh. The ETS were the first guests from the Baltics at the Edinburgh Fringe; moreover, due to the August Coup happening at the same time in the USSR when Gorbachev was put under house arrest and the future of the Soviet Union was in disarray, the company gained a great deal of attention during the festival. After returning home, the company took a break, and

25 Valtere *Latvijas Jaunatne* 26.5.1992.

26 Lauksargs *Rīgas Balss* 3.6.1988.

27 Jervis 1999, 4.

then questioned its future. Part of the company saw Runtulis as its potential leader; however, he refused this role: "It was a director's theatre. Furthermore, the only possibility was the theatre of personalities. However, I did not see that we could make it. This was my innermost belief. We had been little screws. Only part of the company was aware that they were these screws, but they understood the matter. The other part thought that they are great artists already."²⁸ In May of 1992, the company performed a series of *A Play with a Song of a Goat* at the exhibition hall Arsenāls in memoriam of Ilmārs Elerts, and then the group disappeared because there was no centre anymore, which could hold it together.

The artistic and social practice of Elerts was a continuous search for new expressions of performativity in theatre that would provide an alternative to the dominating mode of psychological theatre. The main characteristics of his approach were attention to bodywork, an interest in and experimentation with the ritual beginnings and historic forms of theatre, usage of signs as theatrical language instead of psychological realism, and the tearing down of the fourth wall. His practice was *transgressive* not only artistically, but also as a truly independent and self-sustainable organizational model.

Theatre Studio No. 8

In 1987, the representative of the Theatre Administration of the Ministry of Culture, Miervaldis Mozers, stated in an interview for the youth magazine *Liesma*: "During this year, the activity of theatre studios has increased enormously. Three different types of people appear on the phone and in the offices of the Ministry of Culture. The first type: we need Alfrēds Rubiks²⁹ and the cellar in Old Riga, and then we will show you what we can do!³⁰ The second type: here is my play, give me a theatre to stage it! The third type creates independently in a non-existent space. This is the case with the Theatre Studio No. 8."³¹

The TS8 started in 1986 with a *transgressive* act when a few acting students at the State Conservatory Theatre Department who were finishing their studies refused prescribed employment in a state repertory theatre. At that time, each enrolled acting course was trained for a specific state theatre, and these were graduates for the Liepāja Theatre. This gesture of Jānis Deinats, Uģis Polis, Ivars Puga, and Imants Vekmans was unusual, as normally young actors did not question their destined career. However, in 1986, the processes of the *perestroika* allowed people to feel more responsible for their decisions. Changes were in the air as the Iron Curtain loosened letting through more information and opening possibilities to travel to the West. The context of Latvian theatre being in decline that led to a crisis at the beginning of the 1990s also stimulated the reluctance of the young actors to become part of the institutional theatre in the province.

The playwright Lauris Gundars who became part of the company due to his friendship with the actors remembers that as early as 1985, they decided to act independently and to stage their own performances.³² He suggested they involve theatre maker Modris Tenisons (1945–2020) who was invited to teach stage movement at the State Conservatory. A graduate of the People's Film Actors Studio³³, Romāns Baumanis, also joined the company. They decided to work with material that had not been staged in Latvia before and chose Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The company got the name Theatre No. 8 as the team considered it the eighth theatre in Riga besides seven institutional theatres. Later they added the term "studio" responding to the decree on studio-theatres. The TS8 was officially established on 24 June 1987, by *The Regulation on the Amateur Association "Theatre-studio No. 8"* of the Riga City Committee of the Latvian Leninist Communist Youth Union.

28 Viktors Runtulis 21.4.2021.

29 Alfrēds Rubiks was the head of the Riga City Executive Committee (1984–1990).

30 This is a reference to the already mentioned theatre Kabata and other initiatives of the time, which were looking for a venue and asking for unused premises for their activities often found in cellars of the Old city.

31 Miervaldis Mozers cited in Leimanis *Liesma* 1.11.1987.

32 Lauris Gundars 4.10.2022.

33 People's Film Actors Studio, established at the Riga Film Studio in 1965, provided an informal film actors' course for young people. It existed until 1995, and during 30 years raised 8 generations of young actors many of whom continued their education at the State Conservatory Theatre Department and became well-known theatre and film actors.

For almost one year, the company collectively worked on the Latvian translation of the play and rehearsed the scenes changing roles and discussing the interpretation. Tenisons played a crucial role in the methodical and aesthetic choices of the group. He was a self-educated visual and movement artist with a background at the Riga Pantomime in the 1960s. His own mime troupe was established as a separate section of the Kaunas Drama Theatre in Lithuania in 1967 that later moved to Kaunas Musical Theatre. The Soviet Lithuanian authorities banned the troupe after the self-immolation of 19-year-old Romas Kalanta (1953–1972), and the subsequent youth protests against the Soviet regime in Kaunas in 1972. Tenisons returned to Riga and occasionally worked as a scenographer and movement director for theatre performances creating an original theatre language. He was always perceived as an outsider of the theatre system with a strong artistic signature. However, his artistic heritage and impact have been barely researched.³⁴ Gundars characterizes Tenisons as a self-made theatre maker with a strong vision and interest in developing artistic personalities with an emphasis on physical expression and collective creation, being more interested in process rather than product. Gundars considers working with Tenisons as one of his *universities* and affirms that the core group became a true collective, understanding each other without words.³⁵



Figure 4: Septītais_plakats: The poster of the performance The Seventh by Ivars Maillītis

After almost a year of intense rehearsals, three or four times per week, the company finally did not stage *Waiting for Godot*, finding it inappropriate for the local context. To avoid the breakup of the group, Gundars wrote his first play *The Seventh* in two weeks, inspired by an absurdist approach. It was defined as a fairy tale in one act or a primitive tragedy, and though it was a reference to Grimm's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, there were only six dwarfs trying to build and fix a new house and waiting for the seventh one. The play was an allegory of the socio-political situation: "The issue of the new house has deeply matured us, demanding a quick solution in the direction of the plus sign... and at any moment the house could fall on our heads."³⁶ The performance was a *transgression* of all assumptions of how theatre should be made in the dominating psychological theatre mode. Instead of properly psychologically grounded characters, actors played out absurd situations and improvised a lot. "There was an element of happenings, an element of improvisation, an element of... that "dangerous" freedom..."³⁷ The company attempted but did not manage to get a venue. The premiere took

34 Vējš 2002.

35 Lauris Gundars 4.10.2022.

36 Gundars 1987, 7–8.

37 Raiskuma *Latvijas Jaunatne* 13.8.1993.

place in December 1986 at the Riga Medical Workers House, and altogether they performed around fifty shows in different venues. Later Mihails Liņevs, actor and director of the State Puppet Theatre, joined the company to replace Ivars Puga who got a contract with the state Drama Theatre. The audience was thrilled by the unusual performances; however, critics did not consider it adequate for proper reviews.



Figure 5: *Septitais_3_S.Akuraters: Performance The Seventh. Photo: Sergejs Akurāters*

In 1987, the TS8 was invited to the All-Union Festival of Theatre-Studios *Plays in Lefortova* in Moscow, which had been established in 1986. They achieved a great response for *The Seventh* played in Russian because, for the Russian audience, the performance carried a double meaning and was perceived as an allegoric criticism of the current authorities. On the other hand, the Latvian audience read it less as a political performance, instead being thrilled by its absurdist approach and freedom and playfulness of expression. In 1989, the TS8 was invited as one of the representatives of the Soviet Union to the festival *Next Stop Soviet* in Copenhagen organized by young people from Christiania. They appeared as the only group from the USSR and their performance opened the festival. Gundars remembers that they decided not to perform *The Seventh* as a text-based performance, but to create a new performance on the spot as they had an opportunity to reside there a week before the beginning of the festival. Two actresses of Ansis Rūtentāls Movement Theatre – Indra Baumanė and Raimonda Vazdika – had joined the group. Over the course of one week, the TS8 created an artistic installation – a 5x5 metres object made from white and red wooden bars representing the ancient Latvian signs – that was placed at the entrance to the festival venue. They also created the performative event that ended up with the changed roles of the performers and the audience. In the pictures published in the theatre magazine *Teātra Vēstnesis (Theatre Review)* of 1989, there are images of a naked man with a covered face, a strange lady with an accordion, some guys in black cloth with a hood, and most of them are busy with a tangled string which seemingly connects them all.³⁸ Gundars remembers that the performance was a total improvisation involving repainting actors in white and ending up with the spectators on stage and the performers watching them from the seats. He confirms: “I cannot see the same level of improvisation we achieved then in Latvian theatre later” and “it was possible only because we had reached a high level of ensemble play”.³⁹

The TS8 created one more performance: *A Four-handed Game in Unsuitable Conditions* premiered in January 1989 in the cellar on Krāmu Street in the Old Town. It was a compilation

³⁸ Tenisons 1989.

³⁹ Lauris Gundars 4.10.2022.

of plays by the Soviet author Pavel Yaltsev about “the enemies of the people” in the Stalinist period, as well as a play by the Latvian writer Anšlavs Eglītis with a hero reminiscent of Baron Munchausen or Ostap Bender⁴⁰ during the interwar period in “bourgeois” Latvia, and Lauris Gundars’ own creation where characters from both plays met. Shortly afterwards, the company dissolved due to a lack of organizational capacity and the extremely challenging economic conditions of the transition period. Gundars started his studies in script writing in Moscow and could not play the role of managing the company anymore.

The TS8 was an example of a genuine *transgression* on the threshold of changing times. Firstly, the refusing of employment in a state theatre by the core members of the company was a gesture of *reflexive transgression* “questioning both its own role and that of the culture that has defined it in its otherness,”⁴¹ i.e., they questioned the theatre system of the time as such. Secondly, the major role in the company of Lauris Gundars who was interested in theatre but did not have any related education or experience at the time, and Modris Tenisons who was an outsider and independent thinker in the context of the Latvian theatre was a *transgression* of assumptions regarding the *professionalism* and acknowledgement in the field. Thirdly, the company achieved a high level of ensemble work, which at the time was more characteristic of stable amateur theatres and contradictory to the star-driven approach in institutional theatres whose large troupes consisted of actors from different generations, values, and backgrounds. Finally, the aesthetics and working methodology of the TS8 were *transgressive* because it did not accept any rules of the dominating theatre mode; instead, it questioned the boundaries of theatre art and incorporated a performance art practice that was unusual in the Latvian theatre context of the time.

Conclusions

The article focused on two Latvian independent theatre companies established in 1987, traced their roots in the alternative theatre and performance culture of the Soviet period, and questioned the inherited theatre research methodology which strictly separates the *official* culture denominated as *professional* from the *amateur* and *underground* artistic practices. Instead, a holistic perspective is suggested which invites acknowledging the rhizomatic nature of Latvian theatre and performance processes opening new perspectives for theatre research to study the mutual influences and transitions of these artificially separated spheres. John Jervis’s definition of *transgression* was examined via these specific case studies demonstrating the transgressive nature of their artistic and organizational attempts in the particular historical context.

During the transition period of the late 1980s and early 1990s in Latvia, alternative theatre practices to the dominant psychological theatre mode became more visible and established. The socio-political changes of *perestroika* inspired certain theatre makers to transgress the usual *order of things* in the theatre field aesthetically and organizationally. Both case studies of this article reveal the roots of these practices in the alternative theatre movements of the 1970s and 1980s that were possible only as part of the amateur theatre or underground culture. The article suggests changing the perspective in theatre research and looking at the theatre scene as a whole without separating the *professional* and *amateur* realms in case of artistically innovative practices. The Experimental Theatre Studio growing out of an amateur theatre group in the late 1980s became an established company operating as a self-sustainable organizational model and continued its search for an alternative theatre language focused on the actor’s body, experimentation with elements of ritual and historic forms of theatre, and various communication forms with the audience. After the sudden death of its leader, Ilmārs Elerts, the company dissolved in 1992. The Theatre Studio No. 8 was established in 1987 as the first attempt of recent graduates of acting studies to create an alternative theatre model to the institutionalized theatre system of the time. The company achieved a high level of ensemble work thanks to the intuitive and independently explored methodology of Modris Tenisons and performed an absurdist approach mixed with performance art strategies hardly known and

40 Ostap Bender is the protagonist of the picaresque novels *The Twelve Chairs* and *The Little Golden Calf* by Russian writers Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov.

41 Jervis 1999, 4.

adopted in the context of Latvian theatre of the time. The TS8 disappeared in 1989 due to a lack of organizational capacity.

The *transgression* performed by both companies did not leave immediate traces in Latvian theatre nor in its performance culture dominated by traditional and conservative values and approaches. However, further research of similar phenomena may demonstrate that a holistic approach to the theatre and performance culture of the recent past could reveal hidden connections and mutual influences that may change the perception of Latvian theatre inscribing back into the theatre and performance history the phenomena that have been neglected due to the unquestioned methodology of theatre research.

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