

LETTER FROM LATVIA



BY ELIZA BENT

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A CRASH COURSE FOR THOSE NEW TO THEATRE IN LATVIA:

Despite being sandwiched between its Baltic neighbors Estonia (to the north) and Lithuania (to the south), Latvia is most influenced by Russian and German theatre traditions. Not surprisingly, the newly independent nation (as of 1991), which is about the size of Kentucky and has 2.23 million inhabitants, was occupied by the two superpowers throughout its history—in fact, the German composer Richard Wagner and the Russian theatre figure Michael Chekhov both lived in Riga, the nation's capital, for periods of time. On Nov. 18, 1918, Latvians declared their sovereignty at the National Theatre (annual concerts still take place to commemorate the day).

"After World War II Latvian theatre was subjected to ideological pressures from the Soviet authorities and was forced to resort to Aesop's language," says Undine Adamaite, arts journalist for *Diena*, Riga's daily newspaper. "Perhaps this is why Latvian theatre can seem a bit heavy and serious." Others in the arts scene concur. The scale of influence tips toward Russia—Russians make up the majority of non-Latvians living in Latvia, at 29 percent. Andra Rutkevica, marketing manager at New Riga Theatre, and Gundega Laivina, director of the New Theatre Institute of Latvia, both point to Russia's influence in education. "The majority of our directors are studying in Russia or are now teaching the younger generations," Rutkevica says. Laivina adds, "You can see the Russian

impact in the actors' work as well as the domination of works made in a psychological style."

Alvis Hermanis, the darling of Latvian directors and a major figure in European theatre (he won the 2007 Europe Prize for new theatrical realities) speaks to the deeper implications of these influences. While he agrees that superpower icons Brecht and Stanislavsky have left their marks on Latvia, he suggests that native theatre has a different function. "In Germany citizens attend theatre with the expectation that it will improve society socially and politically. In Latvia, theatre is a place where you can cure your soul, where you can feed your spiritual hunger. It's almost religious, and closer to the Russian tradition."

My animus was well fed in Riga, where I attended the Latvian Theatre Showcase in March, which featured the latest offerings in Latvian theatre. First up was *Latvian Love*, directed by Hermanis and created in collaboration with his ensemble of actors. The four-and-a-half-hour exploration of the ordinariness of coupling delves into loneliness, loss and the failure to communicate. In many ways, the play is a love letter to the nation of Latvia: The characters transcend cultures—crotchety old men and women, sassy teens and ill-at-ease intellectuals pepper the scenes—yet the specifics of their situations are undeniably Latvian. In one episode, people gossip about a young man's move to the big city (namely Riga). In another a couple flirts at a large choral gathering. Choirs play a big role in Latvian

Above, a scene from Alvis Hermanis's *Latvian Love* at New Riga Theatre.

In the Baltic nation, directors mull on the everyday for spiritual effects



Rēzija Kalniņa and Adris Bulis in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Polischuk.

COURTESY OF THEATRE OBSERVATORY

culture—along with theatre, they provided a place where the Latvian language could survive throughout the nation’s numerous occupations. (Every four years in Latvia there is a kind of choral olympics—there’s even a reality TV show in which choirs compete.)

Hermanis stages his play in a deceptively simple manner. A rolling backdrop indicates an outdoor cafe, a classroom, a painter’s studio. In one vignette a man and woman meet at the beach and begin to awkwardly undress in silence. The audience can’t help but guffaw at the awful honesty of disrobing in front of someone you want to impress. The pair sunbathes and listens to the surf. The man swigs something dark out of a bottle. Is it Coca-Cola or *Rīga melnais balzams*, the popular herbal liqueur local to Latvia? Doesn’t matter—the aggressive manner with which he drinks makes his addictive personality clear. The lights change and the two characters—who haven’t yet spoken—fill us in on a few particulars of their doomed relationship and the man’s alcoholism.

Simple, yet searing in its poignancy. “Hermanis always manages to create refined and witty montages,” *Diena’s* Adamaite says. “He brings new, provocative contexts to ordinary things and models of thinking.” Part of Hermanis’s appeal comes from his documentary approach—taking the stories of real-life people and creating improvisations with his excellent actors. “Fifty percent or more is done by his extremely talented actors,” New Theatre Institute’s Laivina notes. “In the Latvian context, he’s very special because he’s one of few reacting to current social and political situations.” Yet Hermanis’s style is always changing. According to Adamaite, “You can never imagine the face of his next piece. He surprises all the time.”

Sound of Silence, an earlier piece whose subtitle is “or the concert of Simon and Garfunkel in Riga in 1968, which never took place” was done without text. It was again co-created with actors. (Almost everyone I speak with points to this practice as an innovation in Latvian theatre while simultaneously lamenting the lack of up-and-coming Latvian playwrights. Laivina bluntly cites “very bad contemporary playwriting” as a problem in Latvian theatre. Says Adamaite, “Latvian theatre generally is a theatre of directors.” New Riga Theatre’s Rutkevica quips, “You can be

a good writer, but that doesn’t mean you’re a good playwright!”) Zaiga Rita Paura, a Latvian theatregoer and longtime Hermanis fan, recalls seeing *Sound of Silence* at New Riga Theatre (where Hermanis is artistic director) and being moved at the get-go. “Alvis and the actors had created some 200 etudes—all without words—and chose only some to be staged. In one scene young men secretly listen to Simon and Garfunkel tapes and try to catch Radio Luxembourg [which played music outlawed by the Soviets]. Meanwhile they try to avoid Soviet radio interference. The scene was so amusing. It made you laugh through the tears.” She pauses. “Alvis’s performances touch your emotions, come to the heart and then make you think.”

When I catch up with Hermanis on the phone—he has been working in Cologne, Germany, and was unable to attend the festival—he admits that nostalgia plays a role in many of his works. *Latvian Love*, for example, was made while Hermanis and his actors were on tour with *Long Life* (a meditation on old age) in France. “We had some old Latvian newspapers with us with personal ads. There was nothing to do for a long part of the day, so we would make improvisations where we imagined those people going on blind dates.”

If sentimentality suits Latvia’s leading director, so does intelligent commentary and critical observation, qualities that make his work much more than mere schmaltz. “Alvis forces the spectators to be an active part of the production, because you have to create your own opinions,” says New Riga Theatre’s Rutkevica. “It’s not so straightforward. He presents different scenes which have plenty of points of view, but you have to decide how to think about it. If you want to criticize, go ahead, but Hermanis himself is doing the criticizing.”

CONSIDER HERMANIS’S NEWEST PRODUCTION, *MARTHA FROM the Blue Hill*, in which 12 actors appear on stage seated at a long wooden table (evoking *The Last Supper*). Dressed in charming, folksy Eastern European outfits, they talk about their personal experiences with Martha, a well-known Latvian mystic (who never appears on stage). At one point a man tells a rambling story about his ailments and Martha’s numerous scabby cats and how Martha once went on and on about the *Titanic* catastrophe. Eventually he describes how Martha cured his sickness, adding, “There were just two things I didn’t understand: Why were those cats so scabby, and why did she tell me about the *Titanic*?” Cue Céline Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On,” to great comedic effect—with two actors even reenacting the pose made famous by Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio in the 1997 film. Later in the play, when Dion’s voice swells again, one can’t help but believe that Martha really was the shaman she was purported to be. Yet something deeper than a series of homespun tales is at work.

“*Martha from the Blue Hill* was dedicated to this huge depression,” Hermanis deadpans. I ask if he means the current economic climate, but he’s quick to correct me. “It’s more than the economical situation—it’s the moral depression. There were all these expectations when Latvia became independent,” he explains, “expectations that didn’t materialize for the majority of people. The size of disappointment is really critical.” Céline Dion’s song, while ironic, is also earnest in its recalling of real disaster.

The mood in Riga is indeed somber. One festival organizer half-heartedly apologizes for the “lack of smiling faces” on the city’s streets. Ilze

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Jurkāne, vice president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Latvia and a key player in the creation of the Latvian banking system, describes a popular joke nowadays wherein someone shits on the U.S.'s economy, then does the same to Europe's, and then arrives in Latvia, where he proclaims, "Someone else has already been here!"

Hermanis wonders how Latvia will get out of its current predicament. "Most people, if they live in this part of the world, are not used to taking responsibility for themselves. They expect someone else to take care of them. They expect some kind of miracle. Historically there's always been someone to blame—the Germans, the Russians... even the Swedish. But this time, my country belongs to *us*. And we expect some kind of miracle. My nation is very, very naïve."

The characters in *Martha from the Blue Hill* may be naïve, but they are also intelligent, strong and funny. Most important, they are honest portrayals of Latvians. Nearly everyone I spoke with while in Latvia wanted to be sure I knew Martha was a real person and shared stories about Martha and the mini-miracles they—or members of their families—had experienced.

ANOTHER PLAY IN WHICH RELIGION made an unexpected appearance was Adam Rapp's *Finer Noble Gases*, which featured a cross erected out of red McDonald's French-fry holders taped to a wall. As Ilze Olingere, the play's director and a voice to watch from the younger generation, explained, "This is culturally significant, as Orthodox believers have 'red corners,' or shrines, in their apartments."

I was curious about Olingere's choice of material. She recalls seeing Rapp's play in 2005 in Moscow (she studied at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts, GITIS). "I saw my generation, my friends, colleagues and—frighteningly—myself." Olingere argues that dramatic texts about youth losing themselves too often manifest angst and anger. Rapp's characters, whom she calls "anti-theatrical Oblomovs," referring to Ivan Goncharov's slacker character in his 1859 novel, are something quite different—they struggle to feel. "Here lies the pain and meaning in my production," she suggests.

Despite such pain, Olingere's actors did a marvelous job of mulling the humor despite a general lack of physicality in the staging.

"Improvisation is the most important principle of this production," Olingere notes. "My job is to create an atmosphere where actors can test logic within the text of the author. The text can be seen as the flags of a slalom skier. The skier knows he must hit each flag and the path is fairly explicit. However, between the flags the skier has the freedom to decide the best path." Olingere's actors took the game to heart—none more so than Andris Keiss. His verbal asides seemed to throw off the live translators and his mirth was so natural and unhinged I had to wonder whose peals of laughter I was hearing—the actor's or the character's? The effect was tantalizing.

SIMILARLY MESMERIZING WAS Galina Polischuk's production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Yet again, I wondered about the choice of an American text. Polischuk tells me, "Latvians have a special relationship to *Streetcar*. There was a legendary performance in the '50s with famous actors that still resonates." Moreover, her connection to Williams has a spiritual element. "Directors often have a special book, a kind of prayer book. For me it's Williams's memoirs." Polischuk staged *The Glass Menagerie* in 2003 and the production is still part of New Riga's repertory.

By the festival's end, the lack of Latvian playwrights had become abundantly clear. Olingere, who calls New Riga home, sums it up well: "We do not spend our time developing scripts, but developing unique theatrical experiences."

Polischuk's Theatre Observatory, of which she is artistic director, provided such an experience and is the closest thing to an independent theatre that Riga has. (Dirty Deal Teatro, which presented some captivating dance pieces, films and puppetry from students and younger Latvian talent, should also be noted.) Founded in 2005, Theatre Observatory's literature claims, "This is not a theatre. Rather, it is a fellowship of artists." Entering the theatre is like descending into some salacious nightclub, complete with coat check. The stage is long and narrow with a bar at one end. It is almost oppressively close to the audience, which seats 50.

Sitting in the front row, I feared tripping the actors. Polischuk writes in an e-mail, "Being so close, the actors can't lie, they cannot cheat the audience." They certainly didn't. Moment to moment the actors interacted with brutal honesty. Rēzija Kalniņa, in

her role of Blanche, earned her reputation as one of Latvia's most respected actresses, while Andris Bulis as Stanley and Ilze Ķuzule as Stella matched her with energy, vulnerability and cruelty. At times it was almost too painful to watch—especially being so near to the action—but one couldn't look away.

But Polischuk's audience involvement differs from, say, that of Hermanis. New Riga's Rutkevica jokes, "Galina is more of a dictator than Alvis." That is, "She expresses her meaning of the play, whereas Alvis presents many points of view that spectators must choose." Polischuk's spin on the American classic was refreshing and riveting but also irreverent—throughout the play, Dolly Parton's voice blared between scenes to both humorous and heartbreaking effect.

"Polischuk uses a specific method drawing from the Russian school of Vasiliev and Klim [directors Anatoly Vasiliev and Vladimir Klimenko]. She's not afraid of experiments," says Laivina. One such experiment was the use of an American actor. I was surprised to see an African-American actor delivering lines in a mid-Atlantic drawl in the minor role of Pablo. After the performance I spoke with Polischuk and Frederick Combs, the American actor (with translation help from Karlina Šadre, Theatre Observatory's manager and actor Bulis). "I wanted a real foreigner to play Pablo—not a Russian or Polish person. That would be too familiar." Polischuk says. She went on to describe walking in the rain one evening close to opening night and seeing a young black man bow to her in the street. A wild goose chase ensued (Polischuk's English was too limited to ask the fellow who he was, and Combs's Latvian was similarly sparse). On par with a *Martha from the Blue Hill* miracle, the team tracked him down. "It was destiny that an actor from Philadelphia got here. And he's such a wise and interesting person!" Combs is grateful for the experience and the company: "They have made life in Latvia more bearable." While he admits it has been challenging to work with Polischuk without a common language, Combs effuses, "Galina is a genius of the theatre." 📌

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