

Staging the Nation: the Case of Lithuanian *Fin de Siècle* Theatre Productions in Foreign Industrial Centers

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In his “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” Walter Benjamin describes Panorama as an attempt of the politically superior citizens to bring the countryside into the city (Benjamin 1986: 146–162). The cylindrical background painting and plastically arranged foreground of the panorama (or diorama) included a sublime countryside landscape and then transformed the city itself into an integral part of it. Similar intentions can be illustrated and confirmed by a phenomenon in Lithuanian cultural history of the late 19th century: numerous amateur theatrical representations, produced by groups of students and workers, and later by Friendly Societies of Lithuanian emigrants in the imperial cities of Russia, such as St. Petersburg and Moscow; industrial centers such as Riga, Odessa, Warsaw, and cities in Eastern Germany and the United States of America¹. This huge network of Lithuanian theatre of the last decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century – commonly referred to as *Lithuanian Evenings* – can be seen as part of the project of bringing the country to the city, as inspired by the representatives of the nascent Lithuanian nationalist intelligentsia. Determined to develop and to modernize Lithuanian culture as the basis for legitimization of the future independent nation-state, nationalist intelligentsia understood the need to transcend the local village communities and to enter the stage of industrialization. Thus the first Lithuanian newspapers of the end of the 19th century such as *Aušra* and *Varpas* urged the peasants to penetrate into the cities, to go into business, and to teach their children city trades. But as Lithuania of the 19th century had been quite a backward country in terms of industrialization, these expectations were more relevant when addressed to emigrants in the foreign cities near and far. Thus the phenomenon of *Lithuanian Evenings* can be perceived as an important political campaign, aimed at spreading a new cultural identity, creating new ways of communication and new feelings of community. Print and spectacle worked hand in hand in spreading information about political changes and representing the imaginary of the nation.

It is no wonder, then, that the particular phenomenon of *Lithuanian Evenings* has been seen as nothing less than the origin, the Herderian *Ursprung* of Lithuanian theatre proper. Not that popular mappings of theatre history could ignore outright the earlier stages of Jesuit school drama, which reached as far back as 16th century, or the manor theatres of the noblemen, Italian opera productions in the rulers' court in Vilnius, or the numerous stage productions

¹ Little has been written on this subject in English. For a social history of Lithuanian *émigrés* in the USA, see Eidintas 2003, Saldukas 2002. The notion of ethnicity in the lives of Lithuanian minorities is discussed in van Reenan 1990. The theatrical activities of Lithuanian Emigration in the USA are reflected in Vaškėlis 1983.

of the first public theatre, opened in Vilnius in 1785. Yet, for nationalist historiography, the crucial fact in defining the proper place and significance of these developments has been that the languages used in these early productions were Latin, Italian and Polish – not Lithuanian. This contravened the ethno-linguistic paradigm, which saw Lithuanian language as the key factor of national culture. Although after the Union of Lublin was signed in 1569, uniting the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland into the Commonwealth state, the Lithuanian nobility persisted in their political autonomy, and the cultural domination of Poland became increasingly important. For example, Lithuanian language was seen by the nobility as inferior and vulgar, and thus the manorial culture (as well as drama) in Lithuania throughout the 17th and 18th centuries was exclusively Polish. For the new generation of Lithuanian intelligentsia of the late 19th century, influenced by the new political ideas of modern nationalism, national liberation, anti-imperialism, and the autonomous, democratic nation-state, this Polonization of the Lithuanian nobility, together with the violent politics of Russification pursued by the Czarist government seemed as threats to or degradations of Lithuanian nationhood. As is characteristic of modern nationalism generally and for the “cultural nationalism” of Eastern Europe in particular², for these Lithuanian intellectuals the nation was not just a political subject but first and foremost – a **culturally** unique collective individual. The historical movement that they initiated (known as “national revival”) was aimed not to reconstruct the historical Polish–Lithuanian state, but rather to create a new Lithuanian nation-state with a newly-invented Lithuanian culture and a new identity based on ethnicity and Lithuanian language. Such an ethno-linguistic model of nationalism has established itself for years as a dominant form of national consciousness.

For these reasons, the period of *Lithuanian Evenings*, crude plays depicting the joys and vices of everyday rural life performed by the common people in non-theatrical spaces, have been of major interest for theatre historians of the interwar period and the Soviet years. The period of *Lithuanian Evenings* followed by the early productions of the Friendly Societies, which included stage performance as part of the evening’s program was seen (and still is seen in many ways) as the seminal or embryo state of the large-scale, developed professional national culture that we have today. I refer here to two major contributions to the historical

² See for example Smith 1991. Smith critically refers to the distinction drawn by Hans Kohn in his “Nationalism: Its Meaning and History”, between rational Western nationalism and organic version of nationalism characteristic to Eastern and Central Europe. He himself suggests a more cautious and yet clean-cut distinction: the civic-territorial “Western” nationalism and ethno-cultural “Eastern” nationalism (Smith 1991: 80–84). On the concept of cultural nationalism see Hutchinson 1994. “Unlike the political nationalist who is fundamentally a rationalist, a cultural nationalist like Herder affirms a cosmology according to which humanity, like nature, is infused with a creative force which endows all things with an individuality. Nations are primordial expressions of this spirit; like families, they are natural solidarities. Nations are then not just political units but *organic* beings, living personalities, whose individuality must be cherished by their members in all their manifestations.” (Hutchinson 1994: 122.)

research of this period: the study called “Lithuanian Theatre in St. Petersburg 1892–1918” by Balys Sruoga, published in 1930 (Sruoga 1930), and a general Lithuanian theatre history by Vytautas Maknys, published in 1972 (Maknys 1972). Although these studies were published in different political contexts – one in the interwar period and the other in the Soviet years –, they can be seen as related; both represent the same nationalist paradigm in historiography, which emphasizes the concept of nation (but not class, gender or religion) as the major factor in describing the development of theatre.

Apparently both books are motivated to find a single source, to represent a **single** origin for a truly Lithuanian kind of theatre. To understand this drive one has to refer to the idea of autochthonism, vitally important for the type of nationalism common for the East European cultures. As opposed to the legends of descent popular among the Lithuanian nobility of the 16th century, that traced the progenitor of the noble families back to the noblemen of Ancient Rome, the myths of modern ethno-genetic nationalism saw vital importance in relating the people to the landscape and the soil of the country. One can see this autochthonic mythology articulated in the neo-romantic imagery of the late 19th century – for example in landscape paintings, representing the tree (the birch or oak in Estonia and the oak in Lithuania) as the symbol of the nation, rooted in the native soil, or in the poetic imagery of *Blut und Boden*. The utopian autochthony of a nation is usually represented by the image of a plant or a tree, rooted deeply into a particular landscape and feeding on the juice or the blood of the soil. The equation of a plant and the nation as autochthonic beings – reflections of which can be traced throughout nationalist discourse – accomplishes a few important things rhetorically: first of all, it represents the mystical link of ontological belonging between the individual (tree, the community and the human being) and the landscape or the native scenery. Secondly, the equation is also a reference to the purity and self-sufficiency of national community and culture, as we see it expressed in the “The Decline of the West” by Oswald Spengler. “A race has roots. Race and landscape belong together. Where a plant takes root, there it dies also. There is certainly a sense in which we can, without absurdity, work backwards from a race to its “home”, but it is much more important to realize that the race adheres permanently to this home with some of its most essential characters of body and soul. If in that home the race cannot be found, this means that the race ceased to exist. A race does not migrate.” (Spengler 1962: 254.)

A very similar kind of attitude can be found in the writings of Balys Sruoga, Lithuanian theatre researcher of the interwar period. Reflecting on the phenomenon of *Lithuanian Evenings*, he sees it primarily as “a fusion of university and soil”, meaning that the theatre productions were created by two confluent powers: the high culture of the university-educated intelligentsia and the creative instincts of the Lithuanian peasantry. “One could hardly find a better example of this fusion than the Lithuanian Evenings. Two elements met in the creative practices of these events: that of the soil and that of the university. The movers, the initiators were usually intelligentsia, most often – students. They directed and performed

together with the peasants in the villages and towns and together with the commoners and workers who came from the villages as well. The ideas of the performance, stage directing, and even acting were from the realm of civilization – the university, while the performers of the idea, the actors with their psychic structure, their habitudes and perception, were of the purely earthly domain. The modern forms of civilization were supplemented here by the pre-civilizational (i.e. pre-historic) juice of culture. [---] How surprising is the elemental force (*Urkraft*) of Lithuanian Evenings, their immediate inspiration which is psychologically close to the folk art.” (Sruoga 1930: 11.)³

It is important to note that “the university”, or highbrow education, inclusive of the durable traditions of European culture, is understood by Sruoga as a mere reinforcement of the raw vitality of the local soil and folk culture, since even the students and other representatives of intelligentsia are ultimately descendants of the peasantry. Sruoga gives a picturesque view of newly dug-up furrows “full of juice and dung” (Sruoga 1930: 10) – the symbolic motherly seedbed for an ever-developing national culture. Nobody – not even Poles, says Sruoga, are able to understand this unique substratum of Lithuanian psyche, culture, and politics.

In the beginning of the 1970s, Vytautas Maknys, a student of Sruoga, basically repeated the same pattern, putting even more emphasis on the folk nature of the early Lithuanian theatre representations. He saw these as logical extensions of paratheatrical folk activities inspired by the most active and creative personalities in rural communities, such as storytellers, singers, dancers, and performers of folk rituals. However, he argued against Sruoga’s claim that the first *Lithuanian Evenings* actually took place in St. Petersburg, and rather saw the spread of these theatrical events as deriving primarily from ethnic Lithuania and then extending to the utmost ends of Russian empire.

In both cases we see the operation of the metaphysical idea of origins, central to nationalist historiography and based on imagery of vegetative mysticism, which relates any creative activities of local artists to the soil and terrain of the country they were born in. The pre-industrial and pre-historic juice of the soil, the immediate elemental force, the *Urkraft* as well as folk art, all reaching into abyss of history are seen here as a guarantee for the purity and self-sufficiency of national culture.

For Sruoga and Maknys, the historical development of Lithuanian theatre was a way to sustain and legitimate Lithuanian culture as integral, homogeneous and organic; their views were responses to the political circumstances of their own times. In 1930 when Sruoga published his book, vehement discussions were taking place in the Lithuanian press about the idea of national theatre and its relation to tendencies in modern theatre coming from Europe and Russia. Certain theatre critics expressed concern about the reforms and artistic activity of Andrius Oleka-Žilinskas, the director of the National Theatre, who was also an actor from

³ Translated by the author.

Stanislavsky's studio and a close friend of Sruoga. Oleka-Žilinskas was accused of secretly importing Russian culture and Bolshevik ideology in the guise of contemporary theatre aesthetics. Faced with xenophobic nationalism, Sruoga tried to reveal a historical perspective, which proved the substantial subordination of a modernist artist to his own culture: if an artist is **rooted** in his native soil, there is no need to fear any fragmenting effects of secondary foreign influences. Vytautas Maknys published his "History of Lithuanian Theatre" in the Soviet years, as an attempt to manifest the self-sufficiency of Lithuanian culture over against the dominant models of history imposed by the Soviet regime. Thus in both of these cases, the history of theatre was being written in the face of issues of hybridization and heterogeneity, when the need to prove the distinction and autochthonic nature of one's own theatre tradition was seen as very important. This is why the notions of originality and homogeneity came to be crucial concepts for the historiography of both Lithuanian theatre researchers.

But let us turn now towards an alternative historical scenario, namely the development of nationalism as proposed by Ernest Gellner in his "Nations and Nationalism" (1983). Claiming that it is nationalism that creates the nation and not the other way around, Gellner illustrates his proposition by referring to an imaginary country called Ruritania (the name derived from *rural*, meaning pre-industrial) located on a piece of land subordinate to an empire called Megalomania (Gellner 1983: 58–62). Very carefully Gellner traces the complex process of how Ruritans left their native landscapes and farms for the imperial cities in search of jobs, and how they found themselves in horrible living conditions in the suburbs of industrial centers. Very soon, however, Ruritans began discovering that certain elements of their everyday life, those they had never previously regarded as important, might now have highly positive consequences for their quality of life: the fact that they spoke in related dialects and shared other similarities in customs and way of life. In the days before the emigration, these facts, what we would now call **culture**, were as natural and invisible as the air they breathed. Now, when mobility and free communication had become the essence of their life, culture became the core of their identity. Certain common traits, however unimportant they may have seemed before, now became the precondition for opportunities to get better jobs, to enter social structures, and to have some social security, for example by forming Friendly Societies. These tendencies were supported even further by the nationalist intelligentsia of Ruritans, doctors and teachers who encouraged this recognition of new identity and initiated certain cultural activities to celebrate and gradually to unify the images and language into a block that we call **national culture**.

Although Gellner's scenario was most probably based on the history of the Czechs, it is strikingly similar in every detail to the processes of the birth of Lithuanian nationalism in the context of the Czarist Russian Empire. *Lithuanian Evenings*, a cultural activity of the Friendly Societies, that included folk songs from the native valleys of Lithuania, dances, poetry readings, and eventually theatrical productions, for the most part depicting the everyday life, manners

and mores of Lithuanian villagers, played an important part in this nationalist project.

According to Gellner, it is precisely the mediation and the heterogeneity of industrial society that determines the formation of national culture and national theatre. More than anyone else, the emigrant is aware of the foreign city as a heterotopic space, the space of contrast. Lithuanian emigrant workers were living in the suburbs of St. Petersburg, a zone of poverty, filth, and alcoholism (similar to the suburbs of London, as vividly described by 19th century writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Friedrich Engels), far away from the center of upmarket shops and palaces.⁴ The social contrasts were further underscored and sustained by linguistic and ethnic differences, as well as by quite complicated attitudes and distrust of czarist authorities. Gellner claims that this feeling of cultural and linguistic distance, while distressing for a single individual, can become a positive power in terms of the formation of new collectives. Far away from their native valleys, landscapes, villages, and families, thrown into the melting pot of the early stages of industrial society, Lithuanian emigrants found each other to be speaking similar dialects, while the others around them were speaking different languages.⁵ This newly derived linguistic identity was most obviously expressed and celebrated in the early theatre productions of the *Lithuanian Evenings*. Something that was natural and invisible had become visible and outward, a discovery indeed.

There are many written sources testifying to the surprise of newcomers from Lithuania when they first saw Lithuanian stage productions in the foreign cities. It was not that they did not speak Lithuanian every day in their home villages; rather, it was the unnaturalness, the theatricality proper of bringing their natural culture and language onto a (foreign) stage that shocked them. Referring to Gellner once again, the theatre stage is a space of mediation, allowing the overcoming of primal immediacy, and seeing and hearing one's own culture and language from the outside. Lithuanians became Lithuanians only after entering the contrasts and heterogeneity of industrial society. Theatre productions were representations of this new discovery.

Consequently, when it comes to the issue of cultural *Ursprung*, one should consider the interplay of similarities (Lithuanian organizations drawing examples from Latvians, Poles etc., i.e. other dwellers of the same imperial cities) and differences, inequalities, and discrepancies of the modern industrial urban era; it is these that make the stage re-presentation of the

4 For the detailed description of the conditions of the working class living in the suburbs of St. Petersburg see Surh 1989, chapter "The City and the Workers".

5 "Most rural migrants to cities encountered a strong sense of their inferiority in the eyes of the citydwellers, and they have typically banded together as much for self-protection and mutual assurance as from a sense of affinity," notes Gerald D. Surh (1989: 19). Although Surh claims that among rural migrants in St. Petersburg there was no phenomenon comparable to the social processes described by Eugen Weber for peasant migrants to nineteenth-century Paris, who clustered in "tight, homogeneous" communities according to regional origin, speaking their own patois etc., *Lithuanian Evenings* follows exactly the same process described by Weber and Gellner (see Weber 1976).

nation possible and necessary. It is the opposition towards degrading social policies, the disposition of imperial power, and an alarming sense of volatile multiplicity, rather than the unperturbed transcendental presence of some “original” prehistoric identity that constitute decisive factors in these early formations of a Lithuanian national theatre⁶.

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⁶ Similarly the theatrical representations in the villages and towns within ethnic Lithuanian territory can be seen not so much as a spontaneous outburst of agrarian *Urkraft*, but rather as a manifestation of a willful, antagonistic “popular” culture “on the social and geographical periphery which resists this [centralized, imperial – E. K.] reconciliation under duress” – as Loren Kruger has put it (Kruger 1992: 3).

**Lavastades rahvust: Leedu *fin de siècle'i* lavastused
välismaistes tööstuskeskustes**

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Suur hulk omavahel seotud teatrisündmusi (tuntud „Leedu õhtutena“), mis leidsid aset 19. sajandi lõpul Leedus ja Leedu emigrantide kogukondades välismaal, moodustasid olulise jõu moodsa rahvusluse kui uue kultuurilise identiteedi levitamisel, uute suhtlemisviiside ja uue (rahvusliku) kogukonnatunde loomisel. Niisiis käsitletakse teatriajaloos neid „Leedu õhtuid“ ei millegi vähemana kui leedu rahvusliku teatri algallikana, Herderi *Ursprung'*ina. Perioodi, mil toimusid „Leedu õhtud“, vastastikuse abistamise ühingute esimesed etendused ja mil teater oli osa mitmesugustest teistest piduõhtutest, on vaadeldud (ja seda tehakse mitmel moel siiani) kaasaegse professionaalse rahvusliku kultuuri pika arengutee esimese, embrüonaalse astmena. Tuginedes kahele leedu teatriloo varasemat perioodi käsitlevale olulisemale uurimusele – Balyz Sruoga teosele „Leedu teater St. Peterburgis“ (1930) ja Vytautas Maknysi maailmateatri ajaloole (1972) –, uuritakse artiklis rahvuslike representatsioonide kujundeid ja retoorikat leedu teatri ajaloos, mis tuginevad autohtonismi (algupärasuse), metafüüsilise päritolu ja rahvusliku kultuuri eneseküllasuse ideedele. Pakutakse välja alternatiivne ajalooline stsenaarium – tegelikult avaldas leedu rahvusliku teatri varastele vormidele otsustavat mõju mitte mingi „algupärase“ eelajaloolise identiteedi transsendentaalne kohalolu, vaid pigem tööstusliku ühiskonna võõrandatus, kontrastirohkus ja heterogeensus, nagu seda tajusid Leedu emigrandid välismaistes tööstuskeskustes.

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