Latvian Drama and Theatre during World War II

Latvia was directly drawn into the events of World War II in 1941. The comparatively short period of the Nazi German occupation in Latvia (1941–1944) now attracts the increasing attention of Latvian scholars in different fields, which is only natural since during the period of the Soviet regime it could not be studied objectively due to ideological reasons. The present article will give an insight into some aspects of Latvian drama and the life of the Latvian theatre during the period of Nazi German occupation focusing on these issues within the context of the aesthetic phenomena and themes characteristic of that time.

In the summer of 1941 – on 1 July – the first Soviet occupation was succeeded by the Nazi German occupation in Latvia. After experiencing the Soviet repressions of 1940 and 1941 as well as the mass deportations of 14 June 1941, many Latvians first perceived the Nazis as the liberators from the Soviet occupation only gradually realizing that it was another repressive occupational regime.

Despite the occupational regime and the economic hardships of the war, the period of 1941–1944 was an active creative time in the Latvian theatre. Similar trends could be observed in other arts as well, in fine arts, for instance, exhibitions were organized very actively both in Riga and other places in Latvia. The number of people visiting the war-time exhibitions was large, and the works of art were intensively purchased both by individuals and organizations. Similarly, the creative processes in Latvian drama and the theatre life became much livelier again after the period of the Soviet occupation, and this resulted in several important artistic works. The Nazi regime interfered in the theatre life just along general lines – it was forbidden to include the plays by Russian authors and those created by playwrights from allied countries in the repertoire, as well as to voice Communist ideas. Nevertheless, there were some exceptions to

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this rule, and a certain selection was made in this respect. Germans loved Pushkin, for instance. In 1940, the Soviet regime had banned the *Swan Lake* in the Opera, accusing it of reactionary romanticism, but during the Nazi regime, the 1941 Opera season was opened with *Eugene Onegin* and the renewed *Swan Lake*.

All in all, a period of flourishing could be observed in the Latvian theatres. The theatres got rid of the Soviet repertoire. The Nazi regime did not require open glorification; their ideological pressure was more refined than that experienced during the Soviet regime of 1940. As to the requirements set for arts, there could be noticed some features characteristic of the Nazi cultural policy: a trend towards monumentalism (neoclassical forms), huge space, high ceiling, etc. There could also be observed some elements of the baroque culture – rich ornamentation, sometimes conveying the idea of artificiality.

Before any kind of stage production – operas, plays, operettas, musical comedies, and ballet productions in particular – a written permission had to be received from Commissioner General. This was stipulated in the direction issued by Commissioner General on 19 December 1941 on requirements regarding the applications for prospective theatre productions in the Eastern Province (Ostland). It was stated in the direction that before commencing any production an application had to be submitted to the District Commissioner:

The applications for the works which were intended to be produced in any other language than German had to be supplemented by a complete text and a prompt book. Any individual who produced or was allowed to produce the above mentioned stage works without the written permission of the Reichskommisar was liable to a fine and 3-month imprisonment or one of these kinds of punishment. (*Des Generalkomissars* 1941: 199)

Censorship was entrusted to academically educated people. As a result, there was weeded out not only the so-called non-Aryan art, but also trash, so the theatre repertoire was cleared of low quality plays. There was a period of revival in culture, including the theatre life. Theatre tickets were sold out. The daily life was hard, insecure and poor, and people were longing for the theatre, for light and

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warmth, good drama, humanist ideas, high spirituality, and a broad scale of thought; it was an opportunity to escape from reality. According to the Latvian theatre expert Lilija Dzene, "the brisk and independent war-time theatre life during the German period in Latvia is admirable. It is like war-time love – ardent and desperate, filled with the power of resistance." (Dzene 1990: 34)

During the German period, there were eleven drama theatres in Latvia: The National Theatre, which had been renamed The Drama Theatre, The Daile (Art) Theatre, Jelgava Theatre, Liepaja City Opera and Drama, Daugavpils Theatre, Latgale Theatre in Rezekne, People's Theatre, North Latvia Theatre, Ventspils Drama Theatre, Cesis Drama Theatre, and two productions were staged by The Latvian Drama Company. The Theatre of Children and Youth and The Russian Drama Theatre, whose premises were used by People's Theatre which focused on entertainment and staged several operettas as well as some plays by Latvian authors, were closed. The theatres were supervised by The Theatre Division of the Department of Culture and Social Affairs, where the theatres had to submit regular reports about their repertoire, visiting artists, as well as the reports about their performances, audiences, earnings, etc. During the period of Nazi German occupation, the theatres produced the works of high artistic quality. Basically, the repertoire consisted of three kinds of plays: Latvian and foreign classics addressing topical issues, individual's position and role in the epoch dominated by brutal force and power, as well as Latvian contemporary dramaturgy. The share of entertainment was quite small in the repertoire.

Latvian drama also flourished during the period of Nazi German occupation. Both the theatre people and the public wanted to cultivate, preserve and see the manifestations of Latvian culture in the theatres; therefore, both the Latvian classics and the original works by the Latvian authors of that period were staged. The authors popular in the 1930s continued working in the theatre, including two of the most prominent Latvian playwrights: Mārtiņš Zīverts created some of his best works during that time, and Anšlavs Eglītis became a strong new voice in the Latvian drama. In order to motivate playwrights to write, The Department of Culture and Social Affairs announced a competition. The participation was quite active, and 66

works were submitted for the competition. Two plays by Mārtiņš Zīverts *Vara* (Power) and *Nauda* (Money), *Intermeco* (Intermezzo) by Elīna Zālīte, as well as the comedies *Kosma konfirmācija* (The Space Confirmation) and *Par purna tiesu* (Win by a Nose) by Anšlavs Eglītis can be mentioned among the assets of the competition. All these pieces of drama were promptly staged and became interesting theatre events. During the German period, nobody forced playwrights to write anything, and no subservient plays pandering to the governing regime were created. Apart from the plays mentioned above, there were created works like *Trauksme paradīzē* (Alarm in Paradise) by Jūlijs Pētersons, the musical comedy *Ezermaļu krokodils* (The Ezermali Crocodile) by Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš and Krišjānis Norvilis, *Dzejnieks un roze* (The Poet and the Rose) by Valdis Grēviņš, *Gudrā Marjana* (Smart Maryana) by Tija Banga, etc.

The themes of the plays and their composition reflected the spiritual climate of that time – social insecurity, the horrors of the war and the hardships made the striving for harmony, safety, peace, and encouragement more acute. There was no demand for the reflection of reality on the stage. The plays were set in the peace-time. The themes of the plays were far away from the harsh reality and focused on fundamental human values. The creation of illusion was a common feature, portraying a harmonious, idealized environment and relationships – the island of happiness, allowing just a few sounds from the outside to penetrate it. It could be regarded as a peculiar myth creation – a quiet resistance to the official myth, which is a common key element of any totalitarianism as far as its political, ideological, aesthetic, and psychological aspect is concerned, irrespective of the state where the particular totalitarian regime exists.

As to the genre, rather a lot of plays created at that time were comedies. There were also plays with the elements of melodrama and psychological analytical drama, and only one play written at the time could be considered as a tragedy – *Vara* by Mārtiņš Zīverts. Most of plays were set in pre-war Latvia; emphasis was put on details reflecting the splendour of life before the war. For instance, the play *Trauksme paradizē* by Jūlijs Pētersons focuses on traditional Latvian values and virtues; the characters are good, positive young people; it depicts idealized Latvian country life and a farmstead as

the micro-model of the happy, sunny and harmonious past, conveying the idea between the lines that now this life has been demolished and destroyed – it is a dream about former Latvia, which is no more.

Ouiet, smarting pain, longing for happiness and harmony can also be felt in the play Intermeco by Elīna Zālīte, the structure of which is closer to a chamber play. The insecurity dominating the world has been transformed in the play into the fragility of human relationships. The love affair of a famous singer and a young district forester from Dundaga depicted in the play sounds like a slightly painful intermezzo, as they both part and continue their lives in separate directions. This play does not offer the depth and the scope of ideas characteristic of a classic; as the title implies - it is just a little intermezzo. Nevertheless, the lyrical sentimental atmosphere of the production with a mute longing for happiness, even an illusory one, enabled the audience to draw some parallels with the feelings vibrating in the actual reality; besides, they were happy to meet their favourite actors Lilija Štengele (the singer Liāna Langa) and Žanis Katlaps (Dainis Ilsters) on the stage. Moreover, the idea that a person could feel really good only in his homeland, at home, in his natural rhythm of life conveyed in the play was also close and understandable to the audience.

A key issue tackled by the drama of that time was the juxtaposition of the brutal, dogmatic, evil world and the subtle, fragile spiritual life; there appears the recurrent image of a dream which emphasizes the tragic incongruity between the dream and reality. The development of this line can be traced in the works by the prolific dramatist Mārtiņš Zīverts. One of his best plays – the drama *Nauda* written in 1942 – is set in Riga in the 1930s. The play is saturated with the crime scheme and character studies – the plot winds around the situation when money unexpectedly falls into the hands of a person who has never had any. It turns out to be not the fulfilment of a dream, but just a coincidence – the main character of the play, the dreamer Piķurgs, finds the money hidden by the criminals. The play treats the relations between man and money in an intriguing way from the angle unusual for Latvian drama: the man is worthless either without money or with it if he loses the sense of his

personality, the meaning of life. The production of *Nauda* in Riga Drama Theatre in 1943 directed by Alfreds Amtmanis–Briedītis became a significant event in the theatre life of that time. Like some other works of that period, the motive of a dream appears in this play – the refreshing dream providing the meaning of life is contrasted to money – the weapon of the powerful – which does not bring the expected happiness contrary to the initial hopes of the main character Pikurgs. Laying his hands on a large sum of money by a lucky chance, the ragman Pikurgs becomes one of the power elite but, having experienced the degenerating power of money, he is neither happy nor satisfied. As far as the direction is concerned, the restaurant scene where the newly rich Pikurgs, played by the actor Jānis Šāberts, orders the richest table to be laid, but allows the noble gentlemen to sit down at it only when they have jumped over a stick like dogs is particularly masterful. And they do jump over it.

The play Minhauzena precības (Munchausen's Marriage) by Mārtiņš Zīverts written in 1941 is a typical piece of that time having a dreamer and fantasizer in its centre with his dream about his dream land Ulubele. It should be noted that in the composition of the play Zīverts has imitated the form of the 18th century classical comedy – one of the models of harmony. Both the form of the play and its characters express the dream of peace and harmony. The plot of the play is based on the event when at a certain winter night both the entourage of the Russian tsarina headed by the nobleman Narishkin and the dreamer gentleman Munchausen seek shelter from the blizzard in the Dunte Manor run by the beautiful baroness Jakobine. Both noble gentlemen start the competition to win Jakobine's heart. This play, which is a typical character comedy, can be treated as a legend of the chivalric century; one of its key themes - saving face is an essential feature of the chivalric century and the characteristic of a great personality. Munchausen and Narishkin are adversaries worthy of each other; there is pride, excitement, self-respect and independent character on both sides. Narishkin has no place either in the Dunte manor or in Jakobine's heart since he belongs to the mighty of this world controlling money and power. The premiere of Minhauzena precības directed by Eduards Smilģis took place on 12 December 1941 in The Daile (Art) Theatre.

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During the period of Nazi German occupation, The Daile Theatre was the leader among other Latvian theatres. The head of this theatre was one of the most distinguished Latvian directors Eduards Smilģis. His creative style – artistic scope, monumental form, aestheticism, as well as the exquisite, graceful scenery of the performances and the characteristic ease of acting, which could be called a peculiar Smilģis' "rococo", related unintentionally with some of the aesthetic requirements set by the Nazi regime. The theatre worked at a very high artistic level and experienced creative success. It had a strong and professional company of actors. Most of the actors working in the theatre were quite young, but they had already acquired the mastery of acting, were full of energy and ready to undertake complicated creative tasks.

Zīverts' comedy Minhauzena precības, permeated with the idea of humanism, was the first play directed by Smilgis during the period of Nazi German occupation. Minhauzena precības is one of the most striking and significant productions of that time reflecting the juxtaposition of the brutal dogmatic world and the subtle spiritual world, with the recurrent image of a dream, which conveys the idea of finding an escape in a dream. On the other hand, it can be inferred from the subtext that it is a dream about Latvia, which does not exist any more, and will possibly never exist again. The production of Minhauzena precības demonstrates very clearly theatre's role of harmonizing and spiritual enrichment. From the dark streets, the night-time curfew and the horrors of war, people came into the light, an exquisite, joyful world dominated by the atmosphere of the chivalric century, just like the tsar's courtiers in Minhauzena precibas, who found shelter from the winter cold and blizzard in the Dunte Manor by the fire-place. The atmosphere which completely overwhelmed the audience was one of the key trump cards of Smilgis' performances. Immersed in the atmosphere of the chivalric century and fantasizing together with Munchausen about his dream land Ulubele - the audience were given an opportunity to enjoy a spectacular and witty comedy where wit sparkled like an old matured wine.

Edgars Zīle, one of the leading actors of The Daile Theatre at that time, played Munchausen as a sensitive dreamer rather than a swaggering braggart; he did not look for the image of the traditional

adventurer, liar and dreamer in the character of Munchausen, but for a man with romantic dreams who hates violence and humiliation. Due to his chivalrous spirit, Munchausen is a kindred soul to Don Quixote rather than to Gargantua with his grotesque fantasies, the features of which can also be traced in Munchausen's image. The dramatic conflict of the production results from Munchausen's spirituality and the subtlety of his soul, on the one hand, and the brutal force and spiritual robustness of Narishkin, played by Artūrs Filipsons, on the other hand.

The German press published in Riga at that time also paid considerable attention to *Minhauzena precības*, possibly due to the popularity of Munchausen's character; it described Zīverts as the author of a beautiful and valuable comedy. As the theatre observer of newspaper *Deutsche Zeitung im Ostland*, who signs with initials L. S., notes:

The comedy abounds in sparkling humor and all kinds of jolly ideas. This comedy is above the average level as the author has managed to intertwine a piece of worldly wisdom into it. First and foremost, it is due to the character of gentleman Munchausen himself, which conveys deep humane content reaching above his adventurous personality, and the great liar and story-teller, appears in a different light. Surely, Munchausen is a well known character in the world; at the same time, his actual fate is unknown. Therefore, it would be important to show this successful, exquisite comedy on the German theatre stage in good translation. (*Deutsche Zeitung im Ostland* 1941: 5)

Minhauzena precības is a vivid example representing one group of productions characteristic of that time, which can be called the dream type performances and which emphasize escape in a dream, in the state of nirvana, thus finding refuge and dissociating oneself from the harsh, tragic reality. A similar trend could be observed in the theatres of other occupied countries. In the French theatre, for instance, several performances staged during the period of Nazi German occupation were based on fairytales and myths (*Renault and Armida* by Jean Cocteau etc.). The use of dream aesthetics, creating the imaginary space and thus alienating oneself from the reality, is also

characteristic of the Latvian literature of that time in general. Consequently, it can be concluded that repressive regimes generate these kinds of tendencies in art.

It is interesting that never before had such attention been paid to the theme of lies as in the war-time Latvian drama. Lies appear there in various gradations – from open hoaxing to romantic fantasies – there is a lot of talk about lies, and characters also lie in the plays. Lies have an important role in the plays like *Nauda*, *Intermeco*, *Čiko* (Chico), *Trauksme paradīzē*, *Kosma konfirmācija*, *Par purna tiesu* etc. This also reflects in a transformed way the disintegration of the stability and uniformity of the outlook of the world. The visible does not correspond to the essence any more; truth is hidden, or it is no longer possible to find one unequivocal answer, one truth.

During the period of World War II, Anšlavs Eglītis, one of the most prominent Latvian playwrights, started his creative career in the Latvian drama. His creative power of a dramatist manifests itself starting from the very first plays – it appears in the word play and in the witty dialogues full of paradoxes. Besides, his plays are very theatrical. Although Eglītis defines his own plays as character comedies, his first plays have to be attributed to situational comedies where action is guided by characters. One particular feature dominates in the characters, and they do not get deeper in the course of the action. In the plays Kosma konfirmācija and Par purna tiesu Anšlavs Eglītis portrays the artistic circles and race course public in a stereotypical, grotesque manner where peoples' relationships are subject to fame and win. The main characters of these plays, Girts Kaužēns and Leofrolds Brempelis, are ardent gamblers; at the same time, they are popular socialites and storytellers, lies being an integral part of their lives. They both live exclusively for themselves and their passion believing that the end justifies the means. The process of the game itself attracts Brempelis as much as the sum of money he might win, or even more - he bets on race horses. He plunges in the game actively and passionately with firm belief in his lucky star. Apart from these leading characters, there are also others that can be considered gamblers. In Par purna tiesu, for instance, it is Mrs. Bisher, the owner of a stable, whose desired trophy is

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completely different – it is Brempelis himself, whom she manages to win being more successful in this game of life.

On 27 April 1944, Mārtiņš Zīverts offered his new play Vara to Smilgis. The leading part – Mindaugs – was already tailored for The Daile Theatre premier Edgars Zīle. This play set in the 13th century. when the Lithuanian grand duke Mindaugs brought the lands belonging to other dukes under his rule, is the only tragedy created in the period of 1941-1945. It depicts the world of violence where human decency, faithfulness and love mean nothing. Everybody who enters Mindaugs' castle is pulled into the circle of violence. The play is a study of relations between power and an individual bringing forward one unsolvable contradiction - it is only violence that can protect an individual from violence. Mindaugs has been lying and killing for the sake of his state Lithuania. In the play, he lies for his own good for the first time when he wants to gain his love - Marte for himself. At this moment, he symbolically loses his invincibility and dies - as power does not need the individual who loves. When Mindaugs dies, the closed space – the inner courtyard of the castle where the action takes place - comes into contact with the outer world for the first time. Paradoxically, it turns out that by means of violence the state has been protected from the chaos reigning outside. The contact results in the victory of chaos. The play foresees the chaos endangering the nation in the future; it as if predicts the end of the German period. As literature and theatre researcher Viktors Hausmanis writes, "both in the drama Nauda and the tragedy Vara Zīverts tackle fundamental problems which, according to the writer, various epochs have posed and are still posing to mankind. There are spiritual values, altruism, and self-sacrifice on the one side and brutal, harsh, absurd power on the other. What should the mighty edifice of the world be based on? What should its foundation be? These are the issues Zīverts is preoccupied with; he is treating them without providing a ready-made answer, as no answer can be given." (Hausmanis 2004: 157)

During the period of Nazi German occupation, there was active search for new theatrical forms, and Mārtiņš Zīverts was the most active in this respect. A good example is the tragedy *Vara* where he develops the form of the so-called large one-act play based on the principle of the continuous increase in the dramatic tension. Another innovation developed by Zīverts in this tragedy is the so-called grand scene. In *Vara*, it is Mindaugs' extensive monologue, during which the audience's attitude to this character changes dramatically.

Zīverts' *Vara* concludes a certain period in Latvian drama characterised by fundamental issues, high passions and strong characters. The future is going to be bleak; human relationships are the only value beyond the direct reach and influence of power – such are the future prospects Zīverts has encoded in the play *Vara* with the intuition of a talented artist, since it is war-time Latvia rather than the 13^{th} century Lithuania the final words in the play: "Oh, Lithuanian men! Your state is burning there!" (Zīverts 1988: 376) refer to.

It can be seen that the tragedy *Vara* has been created under the influence of the themes of ancient and Renaissance tragedies, which have been subjectively transformed. There are also parallels with dramatic works created in other occupied countries during that time, the French drama of World War II, for instance – the plays by Jean Anouilh, The *Flies* by Jean-Paul Sartre etc., which emphasizes the contemporaneity and topicality of the issues raised in Zīverts' works.

There has to be noted one more trend in the Latvian theatre of that time – the increasing popularity of plays – parables. During the period of Nazi German occupation, the productions of Latvian contemporary drama as well as the Latvian and world classics were done purposefully (Zīverts' Vara, Mīla stiprāka par nāvi (Love is more Powerful than Death) by the classic of Latvian drama Rainis; Mary Stuart and Fiesco by Friedrich Schiller; Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and others). The events depicted in these plays based on historical situations and regularities gave an opportunity to draw parallels with the situation in Latvia and the public sentiments at that time. Theatre historian Māris Grēvinš notes: "It was mainly a classical repertoire dealing with the events of the distant past and treating seemingly local and intimate problems, the major and artistically most powerful works in the repertoire inevitably created associations with the actual reality." (Grēviņš 1971: 97) It has to be concluded that during the Nazi regime, the Latvian theatres openly used the socalled Aesopian language and some theatrical forms (performances-

parables, performances-dreams) which were further developed and became widespread in the subsequent Soviet times.

It is interesting that during the period of Nazi German occupation the Latvian theatres did not stage any plays that would be openly antagonistic to the recent Soviet regime experienced in 1940–1941. The play Dienvidvējš (Southern Wind) by Estonian writer August Mälk staged in The Daile Theatre in 1942 by the director Kārlis Veics is the only openly anti-Soviet work which was produced in the Latvian theatres in the period of German occupation. The play is set in Estonia in the first year of the Soviet regime in a fisherman's family. Kārlis Veics has kept to the principles of psychological realism focusing the performance on the inner emotional experience of the characters and highlighting the moments of dramatic conflicts - portraying strong characters tempered by hard work and caricaturing Soviet army men. This play appeared on the stages of several Latvian theatres during the period of German occupation: along with The Daile Theatre it was also produced by Jelgava Theatre, North Latvia Theatre, and Daugavpils Theatre.

When analysing what exactly caused such interest in Latvian original drama as well as national and world classics, it has to be concluded that, first and foremost, it is the humanistic values conveyed in these works, the high moral and ethical imperative, the message about the victory of good over evil, about individuals' ability to preserve their dignity and their moral core in spite of the adverse circumstances, and love for the native land. The strong, manly characters of the classics full of self-respect serve as an inspiration and role models in any historical epoch where an individual faces the problem of moral choice. These works portray people with a passionate heart and ardent, uncontrollable love for freedom who rise up against violence as well as moral and physical enslavement. Apart from that, both the national classics and Latvian original drama give a deep insight into the national character, which was particularly important for the preservation of the national identity at that time, also at the mental level. This is the reason why the producers of the performances paid such attention to the traditional virtues

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A good example is The Daile Theatre, which produced five performances of the Latvian classics, five Latvian contemporary plays and five performances of foreign classics from the end of 1941 to 1944. The German authorities had no objections to such a proportion in the repertoire. The position of the Reichskommisar for Ostland was essential for the Latvian theatre and the cultural life in general. According to him,

National aspirations have to be channelled into the harmless area of culture, folk culture in particular (folk songs, national costumes, and traditional holidays); they have to be allowed to die out in a natural way. These activities of national culture must be air-tightly separated from the German cultural and social life. They have to reach a kind of a deadlock, from which an ambitious and industrious person is trying to get out as it prevents him from joining the German ruling class dominating in Europe. (Mēs apsūdzam 1965: 18)

It has to be concluded that this plan of the Nazi cultural policy to channel the Latvian national aspirations into the seemingly harmless area of culture and art by separating them from the German cultural society and environment, which was originally aimed at the natural gradual extinction of the Latvian culture, actually played into the hands of the Latvian theatre. By staging the classics and the works of Latvian contemporary drama and focusing on universal human values in the performances, the theatres managed to keep the Nazi politics and ideology out of their repertoire. There can be traced just a few separate elements characteristic of totalitarian art - monumentalism, amplitude, etc. However, they organically relate to the existing traditions of the Latvian theatre and fit in naturally in the common context. The theatres managed to preserve and develop the traditions established in the previous years (before the Soviet occupation). Aesthetic experiments, which could be found at the Polish theatre, for instance, working in very difficult conditions at that time, appeared rather seldom in the Latvian theatre.

There can be observed a paradoxical situation that to a certain extent the time of Nazi German occupation was the highest point in the previous twenty-year long period in the development of the

Latvian theatre. The theatres had strong companies of actors who were talented artistic personalities; they staged high quality repertoire, and there were created powerful artistic productions. Working in different conditions, but still trying to maintain the spirit of the national identity, being the theatre for spiritual survival, the Latvian theatre had much in common with the theatres in other occupied countries during World War II. At the end of the German occupation in the autumn of 1944 when the Soviet troops were approaching Riga and it was clear that another Soviet occupation was unavoidable, a large number of actors and other theatre artists emigrated to the West. Even though many artists who had left Latvia started making theatre productions in exile, their emigration was a tragic loss for the Latvian theatre, which was deeply impoverished. Actually, the year 1944 put a bold full stop at the end of the whole artistically bright period in the history of the Latvian theatre.

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