

Theatre in a Contorted Mirror of Satire: Lithuanian Example from 1924–1940

Martynas Petrikas

Periodicals devoted to satire and bitter social critique are intriguing sources for social history, as they represent an alternative to official or canonical views on a range of social matters. Satirical texts devoted to topics concerning the theatre are often found in the popular press, and constitute a “minor” kind of criticism in relation to more professional genres, such as theatre reviews in large dailies or elaborate articles in specialized magazines. Scholarly research unjustly neglects such material: a close examination of these “forgotten voices”¹ can destabilize certain fixed stereotypes, such as an outlook on the theatre as a somewhat sacred realm of art. Needless to say, as far as subsidized theatre is concerned, stereotypes of this kind are typically promoted in the “big”, especially – the official press, where art is often employed to disguise promotion of a wider public and/or political agenda. These mystifications of theatre can be regarded as **artificial** and/or **purposeful** constructs, passed to the public discourse from above. However, a message introduced to public attention by the satirical press has a very different status.

By the merit of the popularity implicit in the genre (“invective is one of the most readable forms of literary art, just as panegyric is one of the dullest”²), reflection of theatre in the arguably contorted mirror of satire can be an indicator of certain popular myths circulating in society. In interwar Lithuania, two periodicals furnish good examples of the process of satirical representation of the theatre – *Spaktyva* (Spyglass) and *Kuntaplis* (Wooden Clog). These publications depicted the image of theatre as an institution and/or art form and as a black hole into which morality and government money disappeared. Yet again, due to specificities of the genre, such “counter-mythology” can be regarded with obvious reservations. Nevertheless, it can be related to the actual views commonly held in interwar Lithuanian society.

This article will focus briefly on public discourse around the theatre which arose before World War I. A good place to begin is with a brief excursus on mythogenesis: how was an image of the theatre formed in society toward the early phases of the development of Lithuanian theatre?

1 We have chosen this term in relation with Dominic Shellard’s definition for previously unknown sources for theatre history. What in case of British Library Theatre Archives Project are recordings of theatre practitioners’ and theatergoers’ memoirs, in the present article are previously neglected or overlooked texts in satirical press. For further reference see: <http://www.bl.uk/projects/theatrearchive/archives.html>.

2 Northrop Frye (1973: 224) states further: “It is an established datum of literature that we like hearing people cursed and are bored with hearing them praised, and almost any denunciation, if vigorous enough, is followed by a reader with the kind of pleasure that soon breaks into a smile.”

At the end of the 19th century, Lithuanian theatre was virtually non-existent. The first public performance in the territory of present Lithuania was given in August 1899. Its organizers enjoyed not only its success but also suffered from governmental repressions. However, public Lithuanian amateur performances outside the country (for example, in the territory of present-day Latvia or Saint Petersburg, where the official ban of public gatherings for Lithuanians was not valid³) and the growing movement of underground activities (known as **secret Lithuanian evenings**) enabled Lithuanian-speaking intellectuals, such as, for instance, Vincas Kudirka, an activist for the rebirth of national consciousness, to regard and to promote the theatre as a piece of complex evidence concerning the very existence of Lithuania as such, on different national, political and artistic levels.

The significance of the spoken word on stage was seen as equal to or even preferable to the printed word (“One theatre performance is much more effective than an extended newspaper debate” (Vaižgantas-Tumas 1895: 107)). It seems that everyone concerned with theatre matters who participated in public discourse was convinced that the stage provided a direct means to consolidate the Lithuanian nation and foster patriotic attitudes. For instance, in public statements by playwright, director and actor Gabrielius Landsbergis-Žemkalnis, the theatre and all creative work together had a certain power over an audience and thus could be effective in fostering external regard for the nation (Landsbergis-Žemkalnis 1906). In his view, theatre was the ultimate tool for nourishing togetherness in an auditorium via the shared experience of joy, proud knowledge, and patriotism. Another extremely important feature of theatre and the art as a whole, according to Landsbergis-Žemkalnis, was their ability to lift the Lithuanian nation onto the same cultural level as developed European nations.

It is essential to mention that, with some exceptions, public discourse around the theatre was almost always about its effect on the sociopolitical domain; other aspects of theatre practice were excluded from consideration. Entertainment, for instance, was often somewhat regretfully acknowledged as something inevitable, since the audience, especially from the rural regions, was still making its first acquaintance with the new experience of attending a performance.

Thus, before World War I, theatrical practice was already, first and foremost, acquiring a mythical contour. It was repeatedly emphasized that theatre had the **power** to resurrect the nation, consolidate it, and bring it recognition and distinction on an international level. An important facet of this mythogenesis aimed at theatre-goers is the concept of the “temple of art and science” which referred to the **extraordinariness** and “**extradailyness**” of the theatre milieu, indeed of the milieu of art in general. Social recognition of this phenomenon occurred almost simultaneously with the beginning of theatre practices. As depicted by one of the

3 The ban was officially lifted in 1904 and resulted in so called boom of public *Lithuanian evenings* throughout the country together with establishments of amateur and semi-amateur theatre groups in major towns of Lithuania.

first Lithuanian newspapers in 1903, the peasantry from the rural regions perceived theatre as a dreadful place, where certain magicians disguised themselves and posed as the Virgin Mary or even God (Š-kla 1903: 214). Landsbergis-Žemkalnis offers a more sophisticated piece of evidence regarding the extraordinariness of the theatre milieu, complaining about his difficulties in gathering participants for amateur performances in Vilnius, because of the widespread notion that an actor was someone beyond the pale of polite society (Landsbergis-Žemkalnis 1910).

These negative features that popular imagination ascribed to the Lithuanian semi-professional artistic milieu were promptly intermingled with the aforementioned positive, extraordinary features of creative work. As a result the concept of theatre as a “temple of art and science” became a multilayered idea. Attendance at a performance was linked to an extraordinary experience where togetherness and significant knowledge radiated in a double context of viewpoints – the first referring to the spectator’s own nation and the second to foreign countries. As such theatre-going gained another certain characteristic, that of engaging in a **patriotic act**.

An architectural project in the city of Vilnius, just prior to the outbreak of World War I is directly connected with these shifting perspectives and complex images of the theatre, and is a concrete manifestation of the idea of the “temple of art and science”. There were plans to build a House of the Nation, which was intended to be the location for Lithuanian theatre and a gallery of paintings by the late Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, the first internationally recognized Lithuanian artist. The building committee chose an undoubtedly symbolic spot for construction: the House was to stand atop a hill in the middle of Vilnius, overlooking the city centre. Due to external and certain internal constraints, however, the House of the Nation was never built. Nevertheless, the “temple of art and science” concept was declared as an official direction for Lithuanian theatre practices, and this was institutionally incarnated as the State Theatre in Kaunas during the next period, between the World Wars.

After the 1918 Declaration of Independence, the capital city moved to Kaunas. Lithuanian theatre matters gained professional status in 1920. Soon thereafter they were incorporated with state governmental affairs in general. The cores of several private troupes were combined and institutionalized, and this marked the birth of the State Theatre, operating under the authority of the Ministry of Education. During the interwar period, the State Theatre was the only theatre production company fully supported by the state, which thus had to fulfill the functions typical of a national theatre.

Everyone from the major press who was concerned with theatre matters almost unanimously agreed that professional Lithuanian theatre (including drama, opera and ballet companies) had numerous **social** and **political** functions, beginning with the formation of Lithuanian identity and ending with the development of a particularly national style of performing arts that could be recognized in the international arena. Again public discourse



Plate 1. The administrator of the State Theatre (possibly Liudas Gira) depicted in *Spaktyva* as an ape (Spaktyva 1926, No. 3).

began actively urging Lithuanian theatre-goers to come to the theatre and support this realm, important or even vital to the newly born nation state. In 1922 Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas wrote: “Drama [theatre – M. P.] has shown, what we all can feel more and more intensely: the strength of our nation is culture [---] Men, attend our Drama theatre” (Vaižgantas-Tumas 1922). In the eyes of the first executive director of the State Theatre, Liudas Gira, it would be “acceptable and even favorable if the theatre would become a certain type of public school of decency and national feelings” (Gira 1925). (See Plate 1.) Consequently, after Antanas Smetona’s authoritarian regime was established in 1926–1927, Vytautas Alantas, a representative of the far right, declared that the theatre “shall accomplish a great cultural work only when it responds to actual concerns of the state”, even “if it will not surprise the world in an artistic sense” (Alantas 1933). Thus, it could be said that the concept of the theatre-in-struggle became entrenched as the only way to perceive theatre practice. Thereby attendance at a State Theatre performance had to become a thrilling experience. To return to the concept of theatre as a “temple” or, to use a more relevant expression, a “**bastion of culture**”, theatre had to affect the psycho-emotional level of the theatre audience.

The State Theatre building was located in the central part of the town, slightly aside from its main artery, *Laisvės alėja* (Liberty Promenade), with a small park surrounding it. It is worthy of mention that material conditions of the theatre continued to improve throughout

this period. To house the theatre, an old building from the late 19th century underwent reconstruction twice, in 1923 and 1930, and the financing for it rose from 824 000 *litas* [the national currency – M. P.] in 1926 to 2 309 244 *litas* in 1939 (Mačiulis 2005: 56). The second phase of reconstruction tamed the Baroque shapes chosen by the first architect, Vladimiras Dubeneckis, into a more rigid classical style, preferred by architect Vytautas Landsbergis-Žemkalnis. The theatre building was converted into a very impressive site, with a seating arrangement stratified according to social status – the most expensive rows in the front, and the upper balcony for the general public.

As depicted in the novel, *Laikinoji sostinė* (“Interim Capital”) by Halina Korskienė, the main character, Audronė, could not enjoy “La Traviata” after accidentally being seated in the most expensive row because she, wearing her humble pullover, was among bare powdered shoulders and fur *manteaux*. She felt like “a green spot” in the stalls, and this feeling of being out of place dampened her prior excitement inspired by the grandeur of the premises and the beauty of the well-lit Theatre *façade*. These impressions, by the way, were in sharp contrast with the way she recalled the performance she had seen from the upper balcony. (Korsakienė 1980: 90–93.)

This excerpt from a novel published in Soviet times was chosen intentionally: the author was clearly expressing her critical outlook on the past. The satirical periodicals that are the focus of the current article, however, were criticizing the present.

In general terms, the emergence of a satiric tone in public discourse can be identified as the surfacing of a second opinion, which almost always collides with the already established or official one. For purposes of the present investigation, two periodicals devoted to satire and humor are relevant. Both could be seen as attempting to create a counter-myth of the theatre which, as outlined above, was mythologized as a powerful citadel for forging a nation in general and each citizen in particular.

One periodical, *Spaktyva* or the Spyglass, circulated irregularly between 1924 and 1934. The other, *Kuntaplis* or Wooden Clog, was published weekly between 1933 and 1940. It was precisely this newspaper that created a metaphor of the State Theatre, which was depicted as a state, named Tea-Tras, with a capital city, Rampa, which was embroiled in a war (Kontramarkiu... 1936). By following this metaphoric story, it is possible to reconstruct the pattern of the internal struggles of the State Theatre. These were repeatedly presented to the readers of *Spaktyva* and *Kuntaplis*.

The first target of satire became the “**struggle for a place under the sun**”, taking place at the backstage corridors of the theatre. *Spaktyva* mocked the appointment of Antanas Sutkus as the executive director of the Theatre. That the person appointing him remained anonymous was cause enough for a scandal, but, to add fuel to the fire, Sutkus restructured the troupe in 1927 by replacing certain of its members. In 1937 *Kuntaplis* advocated having younger actors reduce the hegemony of the older generation. According to *Kuntaplis*, since young actors were relegated to minor parts or small scale matinees for children,

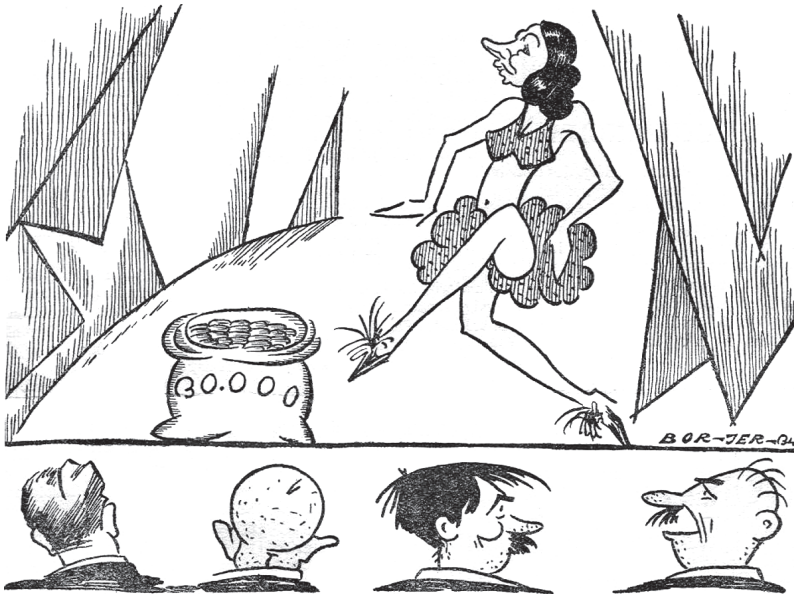


Plate 2. “More One Dances – More One Wants.” Principal dancer Vera Niemchinova has been appointed for a next season. Dance cultivates national spirit. (“How long do you think we would dance around our farm for such a fortune?”) (*Kuntaplis* 1934, No. 18.)

they should stage an extremely childish play, comprehensible enough for the “almighty” Repertory Commission (Užkulisiniai... 1937). This Commission, established by the Ministry of Education, was constantly targeted because of its internal corruption. *Kuntaplis* published a complaint, purportedly by a playwright, delineating the tendency for choosing plays written by Commission members for staging at the State Theatre (Naujas... 1936).

The overall morality of the creative personnel of the State Theatre was a fertile field for the satire of *Spaktyva* and *Kuntaplis*. Their feuilleton writers portrayed actors and singers as constant regulars of establishments such as the Perkauskas Restaurant or the Konrado Café, with a consequent hit to the budget. Furthermore feuilletonists wrote that the creative process was primarily engaged in the Theatre buffet. As a result, *Kuntaplis* stated, the “dark powers of magic” had shrouded the State Theatre, and this affected actors just before curtain call, making it impossible for them to play their parts (Dautartas 1933). Readers did not miss the implication – the actors were drinking to the point that they could no longer act.

The second target of satire might be designated the **struggle for welfare**. The material conditions of the creative personnel of the State Theatre were noticeably unequal. In contrast to the younger actors whose faces were devoid of smiles (“as it is difficult to smile receiving 50 litas per month” (Gyvaplaukis 1937), Director Kastantas Glinskis built a two-storey house (Teatras 1933) and the principal dancer, Vera Niemchinova, had agreed to prolong her contract on condition of receiving an extremely generous honorarium. (Plate 2.)



Plate 3. “Pleasant Recreation.” Famous singer Shaliapin intends to come to Lithuania to fish. (*Kuntaplis* 1934, No. 27.)

The disproportions in honorariums for guest stars were yet another issue for both periodicals. *Kuntaplis* assigned an adage to Fyodor Shaliapin: “I’m coming to Lithuania for a second time since my earnings from the first time did not quite cover the construction of my country house.” (Malonus... 1934.) (Plate 3.) The issue of financial disproportion led directly to a question about the quality provided by an artistic production. If no one had any reservations about Shaliapin’s singing, then the appointment of Latvian scenographer, Ludolfs Liberts, was a case in point for the feuilleton column of *Spaktyva*. Liberts’ scenography and the costumes for the 1927 “Aida” production – despite their costs –, appeared to be a mixture of “Nizhniy Novgorod and Parisian styles” (Receptas... 1927). Questions were also raised about the aesthetic quality of a dance performed by principal dancer and ballet master, Pavel Petrov (the dancer, who was from Russia, was appointed to the State Theatre at age 42). *Spaktyva* stated that for Petrov’s more problematical *pas*, the State Theatre ordered a special propeller (Motoras... 1927). (Plate 4.)

It is easy to see that the State Ballet Company became a favorite target of feuilleton and caricature pieces. The reason here lies in the next target of satire, the **struggle for “Lithuanianism” at the State Theatre**, a point the major press was constantly emphasizing. Of all the performing arts collectives, the Ballet Company was the most international. *Kuntaplis* stated that “after the appointment of Galina Shchegolkova and Nikolaj Beriozov, our national ballet consists of dancers, such as Niemchinova, Shchegolkova, Zverjev, Obuchov and Beriozov” (Baletu... 1933), obviously all Russian names. The famous State Ballet tour to



Plate 4. "Balletmaster of Our Theatre." (*Spaktyva* 1927, No. 11–12.)

Monte Carlo and London provided plentiful material for irony. According to *Kuntaplis* this tour was a poor reason for celebration since all the representatives of the Russian ballet school had invited to a reunion in Monte Carlo for the *Les Ballets Russes* season. Consequently the principal Russian dancers of the State Ballet had decided to take the whole company on tour to cover their travel expenses from the state budget. *Kuntaplis* asked rhetorically: "Since when do we represent Russian ballet art?" (Rebusas 1934). Four years before, *Spaktyva* had detected a rather similar situation in the State Opera Company. The paper wrote that the production of "The Jewels of the Madonna" by Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari, was created by "director – Pavlovski, conductor – Bukšta [who was educated and gained his reputation in Russia – M. P.], scenographer – Lapashinsky, tenor – Tretjakov and ballet master – Petrov" (Teatras 1929). Again, these were all Russian names. As a result, *Kuntaplis*, clearly referring to the plan to ban foreign languages on the premises of the State Theatre, suggested simply that actors be banned from speaking at all (Kaip... 1934).

Summing up, it becomes clear that the satiric strategies of *Spaktyva* and *Kuntaplis* strategies were based on a revisionist notion of the official, mythologized direction articulated for the State Theatre. Both periodicals kept a close eye on the revisions of the "pillars" on which the "temple of art and science" was resting (or was supposed to rest). Ethical issues become the starting point for critique, and, from this perspective, the inner substance of the Theatre, beneath the official opinions in the major press, was revealed to the public. In contradiction to the "high" officially claimed goals stated for the national stage, feuilleton

and caricature writers saw the need to introduce into public discourse the dubious morality of theatre officials and practitioners. Significant issues of artistic quality were also framed in this broader context related to moral attitudes.

The satiric eyes of *Spaktyva* and *Kuntaplis* depicted another lofty function stated for the State Theatre as fundamentally erroneous: its impact in constructing national culture. The satirists expounded that it was foreigners who had laid and maintained the foundation for the professional Lithuanian performing arts. Therefore the officially established aspirations for entirely national and politically important creative output were entirely rhetorical. Moreover, behind the luxurious external appearance of the State Theatre they saw an inner clash between the widely touted **unifying** function of a theatrical event and the clearly divisive arrangement based on class differences. Addressing this issue *Kuntaplis* published a concise guide on getting into the theatre without paying for a ticket and remaining undetected by the usher (Instrukcija... 1936).

Nevertheless, despite the clearly negative attitude towards the actual inner content of the State Theatre and its distorted representation in the major press, neither periodical introduced an alternative way of perceiving theatre practices as such. While dealing with the contradictory concept of the “temple of art and science”, neither one created or, at the very least, systematically reflected an alternative concept. It appears that a basic destabilization of the official outlook was chosen as the most suitable strategy and most effective method for infiltrating a sobering view into public discourse. Thereby the readers of *Spaktyva* and *Kuntaplis* were not presented with a coherent counter-myth or counter-ideology of the theatre.

This example of the treatment of interwar Lithuanian theatre in the satirical press, and the premise of satire to demythologize without presenting alternatives opens onto a wider field of investigation, calling for deeper exploration of the possibilities of public discourse for creating alternative outlooks under the circumstances of national states and authoritarian regimes. The classification of satire proposed by Northrop Frye may prove fruitful as a framework for further scrutiny. Frye’s discrimination between satire of “high” and “low” norm – where in the former instance the satirist seeks to subvert the reality he or she deals with, and in the latter – merely reflects its oddities and obvious absurdity (Frye 1973: 226–236), can possibly be related to a general mode of perceiving reality with its various degrees of conformism.

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Martynas Petrikas – is a doctoral student at the Department of Theatre Studies, Vytautas Magnus University (Kaunas, Lithuania). His main research interests are history of Lithuanian theatre, and history and theory of theatre criticism.
E-mail: m.petrikas@mi.vdu.lt