

## FOREWORD

Every attempt to generalize a particular era's or a nation's theater history will inevitably encounter similar problems. Many areas of creative work, united by the synthetic art of theater, need to be discussed. Dramaturgy effortlessly stands the test of time. Since it is easily preserved in written form, it all too often becomes a surrogate of theater history. Stage decorations, costumes, masks, theater buildings or their ruins can also survive physically and, after one or more centuries, help one to understand certain theatrical aspects from the past. Yet the most important theater players, the directors and actors, are the hardest nuts to crack in a historian's analysis of theater history. Their creative work, bound within the frames of a specific time and a specific place, dies at the very moment of creation. Historians have to try to recreate a view of theater from the accounts and memories of witnesses and critics. The history of small nations that spent many decades fighting for their own survival often tends to romanticize and give the past prominence, granting cultural and artistic awards exceptional importance. Stage art, which gives one very few opportunities to see the results of creation from a historical perspective, offers the most favorable conditions for the breeding of art legends. The destruction of these legends is hardly the historian's most important task.

In the few centuries of its existence, Lithuanian theater has been viewed not only from an artistic perspective, but also using societal criteria. Nowadays it is almost impossible to untangle and reveal all of these artistic, societal, political and national assessment criteria. Therefore, we hope that the reader looking into the Lithuanian theater's past will judge Lithuania's Shakespeares and Gielguds leniently.

The first of its kind, this book attempts to comprehensively and consistently present the entirety of Lithuanian theater's history to the foreign reader. Yet it must be noted that this work focuses on Lithuanian drama theater and, for the most part, it concentrates on the artists whose creations were in Lithuanian. Of course, these genre and linguistic boundaries are quite relative – the more we go into the past, the more difficult it is to define clear boundaries between musical and drama theater. Moreover, languages in Lithuania intertwine just like in any other land that is surrounded by powerful and influential neighboring states.

For many, Lithuania is nothing more than a small country on the Baltic Sea, and one of the Baltic States. Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians experienced similar historical turbulences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; they suffered the tramples of the same occupant and supported each other in the struggle for liberty. The three nations got accustomed to being mixed up with one another, yet their desire to differ from one another did not weaken. The three nations often sacrificed their unity for a uniqueness that has become so valuable in modern times.

Geographically, Lithuania is the southernmost Baltic state. We are way past the Hippolyte Taine times, when geographical location was used to measure a nation's disposition towards one or another art branch, or when national beauty ideals were linked to natural conditions. When attempting to compare Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian attitudes towards theater and theatricality, we should first remember the historical circumstances rather than geographical factors. Lithuania was the only Baltic State to have been founded in the Middle Ages. The societal stratification of that time was reflected not only in the riches and ancestries, but also in language. The Lithuanian upper rank spoke mostly Polish, and science and education were conducted in Latin; in the years of the czarist Russian occupation Russian was the language used in public. The Lithuanian language was preserved primarily through the efforts of petty noblemen and peasants. Therefore the emerging theater that was in Lithuanian in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did not treat memories of the countries splendid

past as a living source of stage culture, but rather as a theme in their creations.

When continuing this superficial comparison with Lithuania's neighbors, one should also take account of religious differences. Due to historical circumstances, the larger part of Lithuania remained Catholic while Latvians and Estonians became Protestants. This had a large impact on the nation's frame of mind, especially because in the years of the czarist rule, the relationship between Lithuanians and Catholicism was relentlessly emphasized. During the Soviet occupation, the strict attitudes of the Catholic Church became an important source for the Lithuanian nation's resistance to Russification. The ornate Catholic liturgy, as opposed to the modest Protestant prayers, accustomed Lithuanians to an understanding of theatricality, which differed from that of its neighbors. Latvians and Estonians often joke that Lithuanians like to ride a white horse (the Lithuanian coat of arms depicts a rider on a white horse), in other words they tend to overemphasize the historical expression of social life and tend to apply theatricality to everything.

The two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century between the two World Wars were especially significant in the history of Lithuanian culture and statehood. This time was the first period when Lithuania was a free modern nation, and people were in a hurry to provide basis in many areas of life, including theater. Although during the interwar period the Lithuanian Republic, like the majority of Eastern and Central European countries, lacked inner democracy, it is hard to say if without this groundwork the Lithuanian nation would have endured the fifty years of Soviet occupation during which cultural activities were an important balance to the forceful ideology.

Even today, after nearly two decades of independence, Lithuania still searches for an answer to the questions as to who were collaborators, who were conformists, and who really resisted the Soviet occupants. In theater, like in any other societal area, there were all kinds of people. There were the dramaturgists who wrote plays that animated the nation's mind, and there were the censors who recklessly crippled these plays. Still others wrote day-to-day ideological dramas praised by Soviet critics; some directors put them on stage with a

spirit of Communist youth, and others treated these trifling works as a kind of toll that they had to pay before resorting to real creative work. Since theater is a complex, organized, creative branch of art, it depends more on the state than individualistic areas of creation such as fine arts or literature. After all, it is possible to write novels and place manuscripts in the drawer, but it is quite unimaginable to see an actor playing for future generations. Therefore, even in the years of Soviet occupation artists sought ways to express their thoughts publically. Lithuanian theater was perhaps the best setting for the development of the so-called *Aesopian language*, which used stage symbols to extend the boundaries of verbal language.

In the past two decades Lithuanian theater was challenged by the free market. These years were marked by changes in the social status of the artist and a decline in the audience's attention. At the same time this period emphasized the audience's new upward mobility, its quests for new ways of expression, new names, and doors that opened wide to invite in, not only the rest of Europe, but also the entire world. These features are still relevant today, and this is what a subsequent chapter in this work and in the ongoing history of Lithuanian theater would be about.

This book was prepared by a group of authors brought together by the Theater Research Department at the Institute of Culture, Philosophy and Art. It was not an easy task to merge the writings of scholars coming from various backgrounds, different generations and research fields into one unanimous text; therefore, in many cases a mosaic principle had to be applied.

The text of the book contains only the last names of actors, directors, stage designers and playwrights; names, birthdates, and a short description can be found in the extended index at the end of the book. Therefore, this index could serve as a concise encyclopedia of Lithuanian theater dedicated to the foreign reader. The names of Lithuanian plays are written in their original language, and their translation can also be found in the same index. The names of foreign plays in the main text will be found either in their original language or in English, and their translation can also be found in the index.