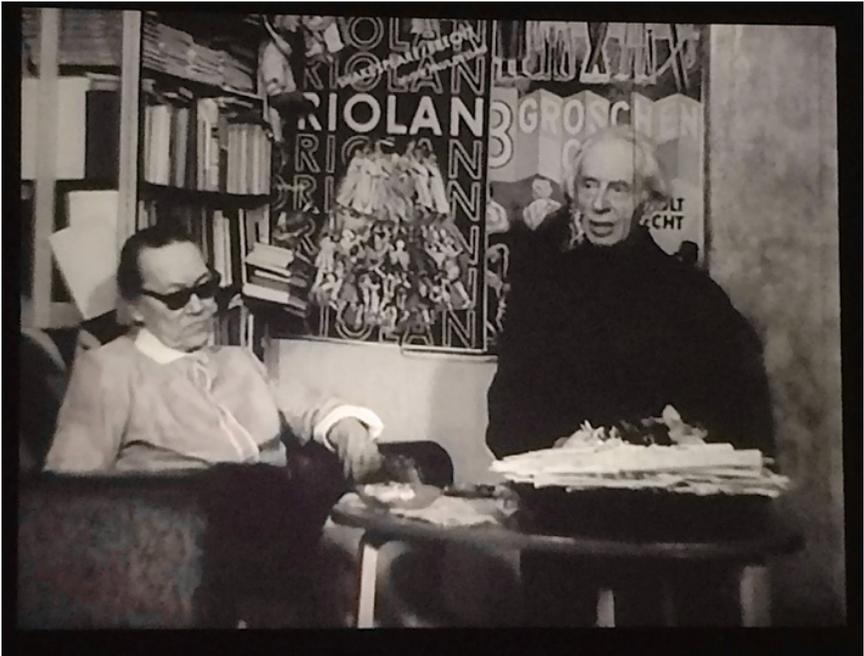


ANNA LĀCIS AND BERNHARD REICH: LIFE AND LOVE IN THE THEATRE

Līga Ulberte

Latvian Academy of Culture



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Lācis and Reich in the documentary *Skatiens. Par Annu Lācis un Bernhardu Reihu* (1969, dir. Leonija Mundeciemas). Photo: Susan Ingram (from the screening on March 6, 2015).

A theatre director, actress, theorist, and organizer, Anna (Asja) Lācis (1891-1979) is often considered the first to have implemented true epic theatre in Latvian drama due to her working relationship with Bertolt Brecht. The evidence for that claim is difficult to find because she never staged any of Brecht's plays, and her directorial work

in Valmiera Theatre during the years 1948-57 was more influenced by the proletarian and political theatre advocated by the father of European political theatre, Erwin Piscator (1893-1966), and by socialist realism, a mandatory element of Soviet art. In evaluating Lācis's historical significance, a distinction should therefore be made between her professional directing and theoretical work and her contradictory personality, because it is possible that the latter has left a more significant impression.

52 Austrian Jewish director and theatre theorist Bernhard Reich (1894-1972), on the other hand, is one of the most important personalities of the German theatre of the 1920s. As a director and dramaturgical collaborator, he worked with outstanding German directors such as Max Reinhardt and, especially, Bertolt Brecht. In 1922, Reich met Anna Lācis in Berlin, and together they moved to the Soviet Union in 1926 and spent the rest of their lives together in the Soviet sphere. Having survived the repressions of the Stalinist regime, Reich spent the last twenty years of his life in Latvia, where his creative work consisted of both theatre directing and writing theoretical essays. This article demonstrates how theatrical work structured Lācis's and Reich's biographies and makes a case for how interconnected the two theatre-makers were through their shared belief in the importance and influence of theatre. It therefore works against the tendency in scholarship to concentrate on Lācis's personal liaisons by showing the role her work in theatre played in mediating the most important and long-lasting relationship in her life.

ANNA LĀCIS'S THEATRICAL ACTIVITY

Anna Lācis (born Liepina), was born on October 19, 1891, in Kempju parish in Riga district and received her first education at Anna Kenina's Gymnasium in Riga. In 1912, she moved to St. Petersburg, where she enrolled in a two-year program in the Faculty of General Education at Vladimir Bekhterev's Psychoneurological Institute to study psychology. In Petersburg, she saw, for the first time, productions by Vsevolod Meyerhold (Всéволод Мейерхóльд, 1874-1940) and performances by Vladimir Mayakovsky (Владимир Маякóвский, 1893-1930), and fell permanently in love with the theatre. Between 1916 and 1918, she studied at Fyodor Komisarjevsky's (Фёдор Комиссаржéвский, 1882-1954) Theatre Studio in Moscow, where she saw the productions of the second most significant modernist theatre director at the time, Alexander Tairov (Александр Таиров, 1885-1950). Lācis's aesthetic perceptions were significantly influenced by her studies and by the theatre in Moscow and Petersburg:

Fyodor Komisarjevsky was fascinated by the medieval theatre. Me too. I liked the versatility of mise-en-scenes of mysteries and miracles where the action took place in several places simultaneously. The principle of this simultaneous play I later used in my own productions. My teacher was convinced that art should reveal the most delicate nuances of the soul, and only then could it give to the public aesthetic pleasure. I was more interested

in the jovial, coarse element of *commedia dell'arte*... (Miglāne et al. 23)

Medieval theatre aesthetics impacted Lācis's staging work in the 1920s, and she used the principles of *commedia dell'arte* in her 1949 production of Carlo Goldoni's comedy *The Servant of Two Masters* at the Valmiera Theatre.

After completing Komisarjevsky's Theatre Studio, Lācis spent two years living in Orel, where she created and managed a study of children's aesthetic education. She also worked with children from a local orphanage and with homeless street children, mostly using the improvisational *études* method. The belief that theatre should merge entertainment with didacticism is associated with Brecht; yet, that is what Lācis managed to do while working in Orel, years before she met him.

Lācis's theatrical work during the first Latvian independence period (1918-40) can be divided into two phases: the first from 1920 until her first trip to Berlin in 1922; and the second from 1925-26 after her return from Germany and before her departure for Moscow. During the first period, Lācis was involved in a passionate relationship with Latvian poet Linards Laicens (1883-1937), which affected her professional work. During this time, Asja managed the study of drama at the Riga People's High School, her first serious directing experience. The aim of the People's High School was to raise the workers' level of education, which meant that lessons at the studio took place in the evenings after work and were attended by non-professional actors, mostly young people. Collaborating with the left-oriented writers Laicens and Leons Paegle (1890-1926), Lācis developed a new theatre program. She sought to create a strong agitprop theatre with expressionist and constructivist characteristics, which would synthesize the Russian (Meyerhold) and German (Piscator) left-wing avant-garde theatre experience in the 1920s. It was meant to be linked to the workers' interests and created by actors using a variety of exaggerated theatrical or artistic means of expression, such as political posters, buffoonery, clownery, or masks, at meetings, rallies, and demonstrations. The young director deliberately opposed an acting style based on psychological realism, the actors' embodiment of their characters, and to a certain extent, even the acting technique in its traditional understanding because she believed that what was important was young people's "pure, unspoiled naturalness and keenness" combined with bodily dexterity:

We wanted to create synthetic art actors, who would be comprehensively developed—who could sing, dance, and be able to manage their body movements. Our theatre needed an energetic, quick-witted actor with a rich fantasy who would be able to deceive the police in the audience, and thus escape complicated and dangerous situations. (Lācis 10)

The demand for a universal, synthetic actor was typical of European theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century, and in this sense Lācis's work organically fits into the aesthetic paradigm of modernism. In the studio, Lācis practised *études* and exercises during which actors had to learn to use excitation factors, such as loud screams and large movements, to directly interact with a spectator's psyche. Theatre attributes were used according to the circus principle: household objects such as chairs, balls,

or cubes were of exaggerated sizes and used for acrobatics or juggling. When she returned to Latvia in 1925, after her first trip to Germany, Lācis tried, on the basis of what she had experienced in the German theatre, to create that type of theatre in the Drama section of the Riga Trade Unions' Central Bureau. The first public production Lācis directed in this studio was Paegle's drama *Faces of the Centuries*, an open-air production in Riga that had taken place during the annual Festival of Culture on June 5, 1921. However, this theatre only began active work in 1923. Later, Lācis called them the "persecuted theatre," using the name of Laicens's constructive play collection, which was published in the 1930s and created under the strong influence of Mayakovsky.

In 1922, Lācis traveled to Berlin to get to know the German theatres better. She spent the next three years in Germany, thanks to meeting Bernhard Reich shortly after her arrival in Berlin. Reich, the director of the German Theatre in Berlin, became Lācis's second and last husband; officially, they registered their marriage only towards the end of their lives.¹ Reich brought Lācis into the German Theatre, introduced her to the theatre directors Max Reinhardt, Bertolt Brecht, and Erwin Piscator, and the film director Fritz Lang (1890-1976). The most important fact in Lācis's professional biography from this period is her participation in Bertolt Brecht's very first staged performance: a production of Christopher Marlowe's *The Life of Edward II of England* in the Munich Chamber Theatre in 1923. She was an assistant director who worked with crowd scenes, which were conceptual for Brecht, and may also have played the role of the young prince Edward III during the première. Opinion is divided on whose idea the realization of the crowd scenes was. In her memoirs Lācis claimed it was hers:

I suggested that the soldiers paint their faces white and, under the noise of war drums, mechanically march as marionettes. [...] I rehearsed the crowd scenes of the production. I tried to involve the extras in a strong rhythm. Their faces had to be immobile and without any thought, as if they wouldn't know why they are shooting and where they're going. But there was still something missing in these scenes. The famous comedian Maxim Valentin, after having seen one rehearsal, said: "They are pale. They are afraid." Brecht added: "They are tired." Now everything was in order. (Miglāne et al. 199, 200)

In 1926, the police started to interfere more often with the activities of Lācis's left-wing-oriented political theatre until her reputation as a politically unreliable person was clear, and she decided to emigrate to the Soviet Union, where Reich was already working in Moscow as a professor and theatre academic. In her first year in Moscow, just as in Orel, Lācis worked with young people, managing a children's summer camp in Sokolniki. However, her main activities at the time were linked to the Theatre section of the Russian Proletarian Writers' Association or РАПП (Российская Ассоциация Пролетарских Писателей), aimed at the protection of politicized and realistic art principles. РАПП was one of the actively functioning and mutually competing left-wing artist groups in the second half of the 1920s in the Soviet Union, which in contrast to, for example, the Association of Revolutionary Russian

artists or AXPP (Ассоциация Художников Революционной России) did not have a common aesthetic platform. According to her memoirs, Lācis's work at РАПП was conflict-ridden. In the collection *Anna Lācis*, she stresses that in some cases, for example, in attitudes towards Meyerhold and the production of Mikhail Bulgakov's (Михаил Булгаков, 1891-1940) play *The Days of the Turbins* in the Moscow Art Theatre in 1926, the opinion of the РАПП board and the theatre section differed, and some members of the section, including Lācis and Reich, ended up leaving РАПП and establishing an association called the Proletarian Theatre. In December 1928, in the name of a "group of members" to which Lācis belonged, the association leader, chief ideologist, and author of revolutionary activities, proletarian writer Vladimir Bill-Belotserkovsky (Владимир Билль-Белоцерковский, 1884-1970), executive secretary Anatoliy Glebov (Анатолий Глебов, 1899-1964), and Reich wrote a letter to Stalin in which they accused the Moscow Art Theatre and Mikhail Bulgakov of anti-Soviet actions:

Do you think that this is a good decision in the current political climate, instead of pushing such an artistic force as the Moscow Art Theatre to adopt revolutionary themes or at least a revolutionary interpretation of the classics, to support this theatre's right-wing tendencies, to ideologically disorganize that part of the theatre youth that already can and wants to collaborate with us, to disorient, push away these theatre specialists by allowing productions of such plays as Bulgakov's *Flight*, which, according to a united Glavrepertkom's artistically political council's [...] decision can be considered a weakly masked glorification of white heroics, even more pronounced praise of white movements than in *The Days of the Turbines*? What to think of the actual "greatest goodwill" towards such authors as Bulgakov, who has achieved productions of four strongly anti-Soviet plays [they are talking about Bulgakov's plays *The Purple Island*, *Zoya's Apartment*, *The Days of the Turbines*, and *Flight*] in Moscow's three major theatres, even though the artistic qualities of these plays are far from excellent, but at best only mediocre? (Соколов 29, 30)

Even before that, on September 23 of the same year, during a public discussion, Bill-Belotserkovsky had supported the departure of Michael Chekhov (Михаил Чехов, 1891-1955), manager, actor, and director of Moscow Art Theatre-2, from the Soviet Union and Meyerhold's request to be allowed to tour abroad: "The working class won't lose anything from this trip. One can even say with certainty that it is not Chekhov and Meyerhold who leave, but Soviet public opinion that forces them to leave" (Соколов 284). РАПП, led by writer Leopold Averbach (Леопольд Авербах, 1903-1937), distanced itself from this opinion, and it could well be this case to which Lācis refers in her memoirs when she writes that "in the matter of Meyerhold's theatre, there was a disagreement between the board of РАПП and the theatre section" (Miglāne et al. 206). At the same time she stated that it was the board of РАПП, and not the Proletarian Theatre Association, that had exaggerated Meyerhold's shortcomings, and that she herself had learned the most about theatre directing from Meyerhold (Miglāne et al. 207-09). However, her excitement about Bill-Belotserkovsky seems more believable than her support for Meyerhold:

During the production of Charles Dickens's play *The Cricket on the Hearth* at the Moscow Art Theatre, he jumped to his feet and wildly cried out: "What is this nonsense! What did we fight for [...] to show the nation a bourgeois family's idyll and bourgeois' moral norms?"—and he dashed out of the theatre like a bullet. Having run home and sat down at a table, he started writing his first story, *Bloody Beefsteak*. A staging of this story was his first step onto the highest drama ladder. (Miglāne et al. 211)

56 Her critical statements about Bulgakov, putting all the responsibility on the shoulders of her German colleagues are also more believable: "When the German writers Kisch, Toller, Wolf, Becher, director Piscator and I went to see *The Days of the Turbines*, they were surprised by the fact that the Soviet theatre shows the enemies of the Soviet Union as unhappy, touching, and noble. But, when they saw Bill-Belotserkovsky's *Storm*, they said 'Look, this is the real Moscow'" (Miglāne et al. 207). So are her comments on her proletarian theatre program: "We noted a few exaggerations in the left theatre, criticized Art Theatre's ideological stance and warned Tairov about his aesthetical passion. We announced that the creative method of the proletarian theatre had to be based on a materialistic dialectic, and we suggested the slogan of dialectical realism" (Miglāne et al. 208). These statements show that Lācis's attitude to the theatre at the time was quite ideological and that, although she recognized the seeking and searching that the Russian theatre modernists were doing, she nevertheless declared them ideologically wrong.

Such a belief, belonging to the realm of socialist realist aesthetics, also characterized most of Lācis's directing work at Valmiera Theatre in the 1950s; the category of right/wrong is one of the main assessment criteria in her theoretical articles and reviews. It is more difficult to explain Reich's participation in the Proletarian Theatre's activities because neither before nor after did he declare himself supportive of politically engaged realistic art. It is hard to believe that Reich's participation in the activities against Russian modernists at the end of the 1920s was his conviction. The reasons might rather be psychological: first of all, Reich had strong feelings for Lācis; second, the autodidact and "natural talent" Bill-Belotserkovsky could have been very interested in Reich's help; and third, Reich, as a Jew, could not return to Germany but could not feel absolutely safe in Soviet Russia either, and thus, perhaps, took the opportunity to appear "politically reliable."

Between 1928 and 1932, Lācis lived in Germany for longer periods of time and maintained professional and private contacts with Piscator and Brecht, who at the time was developing and testing his epic theatre system. There can be no question of their multiple meetings, friendly relationship, and Lācis's impressions of Brecht's personality and work; however, Fuegi's controversial claims to the contrary (cf. Hofmann), the influence Lācis claims to have had on Brecht's method seems exaggerated: "In Munich, a harmonious working group developed around Brecht—Feuchtwanger, Neher, Reich and I—with which he systematically discussed the results of rehearsals and future challenges" (Miglāne et al. 201). Perhaps, what brought Brecht and Asja together was not so much their professional interests as the similarities in their

personalities. In 1997, Russian literary scholar Yury Okljansky (Юрий Окланский), who has long studied Brecht's work and personality, published a psycho- and socio-analytical paper, "Bertolt Brecht's Harem" ("Тарем Бертольта Брехта"), in which, after analyzing Brecht's relationships with his many lovers and literary scholars, who were all talented, strong and successful personalities (also without Brecht's protection), he comes to the reasoned conclusion that

out of all the pleasures, this seeker of the truth preferred two—a passion for new thoughts and for love [...] despite innumerable relations, women's trust in Brecht sometimes even bordered on self-denial. These women continued to love, idolize, and be proud of their former intimacy even after he had divorced them and everything was over. [...] The writer, early on, was aware of his contradictory character, of his two main passions: being an artist—thinker and insatiable enjoyer of the pleasures of existence. (Окланский 6, 7, emphasis mine)

In Asja's relationships with remarkable men such as Julijs Lācis, Linards Laicēns, Brecht, Benjamin, and Reich, whether professional, romantic, or a combination thereof, we can find a very similar principle, which Lācis's daughter Dagmāra Ķimele characterized as follows:

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Photos reveal almost nothing about the real Asja. She had an internal fire which cast a moving afterglow in her big grey eyes. Men rushed to this light just like moths rush to a lighted candle in the dark. [...] Asja undoubtedly also had a strong personality. It seemed that she was sparking from an abundance of energy and vitality. She was talented, well-educated, and smart. She could also fire up other people, inspire them, turn their interests and activities in a new direction. [...] However, she never became a "muse" who, standing behind the curtains, inspired her man to great works. Always and everywhere she herself was more important than anything else, she went and worked on her own. [...] Her colour was blazing orange and ochre yellow. [...] They helped her "to create an impression." In contrast, Asja didn't use cosmetics at all; she coloured neither her lips nor eyes; she never went to a hairdresser. Her healthy, thick hair was always smoothly combed, twisted in a bun on the back of her head. *The contrast between her glaring clothes and ascetic, non-brightened face also visually stressed the duality of Asja's personality. [...] It was caused by a combination, not so frequently occurring, of uncontrollable sexuality and lively intellect. (Ķimele and Strautmane 30-32, emphasis mine)*

Hindsight suggests that Brecht's talent and creative work have proven to be stronger than his personality contradictions, but the same cannot be said so unambiguously about Lācis. The paradoxical similarity of their characters might be the reason why, in spite of both artists' vitally energetic gender identity, the relationship between Brecht and Asja remained friendly but never intimate. This fact was stressed by both Ķimele (Ķimele and Strautmane 137) and Lācis during an interview in the 1970s:

I guess I was the only woman with whom he [Brecht] wasn't physically intimate. [...] Although he, of course, courted me. [...] He called me mulatto, I had a dark complexion, of Livonian origin, with green eyes. In my youth, I was even very pretty. [...] In spite of his relentless conquests and many lovers, Brecht was a man with a gentle heart. If he slept with someone, then he created from this woman a great person. (Окланский 4)

Between 1934 and 1936, Lācis worked as a director in the Latvian theatre Skatuve in Moscow. The most significant productions were Friedrich Wolf's *Peasant Bec* (1934), Bill-Belotserkovsky's *Life is Calling* (1934), and Rudolph Blaumanis's *In the Fire* (1936). Lācis claimed that she had wanted to stage Brecht's *Round Heads and Pointed Heads*, but "by the time the theatre gathered up the courage and accepted my suggestion [...] it was already closed" (Miglāne et al. 215). Between 1936 and 1938, she put on Andrejs Upits's *The Victory of Zingu Jeshka* and Wolf's *Trojan Horse* (both in the 1936-37 season in the Latvian kolkhoz theatre in Smolensk).

In 1938, as a result of Stalin's repressions, Lācis was arrested and spent the next ten years in a camp in Kazakhstan, after which, in the autumn of 1948, she arrived in Valmiera because her status as a politically unreliable person blocked her access to work in theatres in Riga. She was officially recruited on October 12, 1948, and released from her duties on July 7, 1957, due to retirement. In the beginning of 1949, during the main director Zhanis Vinkalns's absence, she worked as an acting artistic director for several months, and then, in the autumn of 1950, she officially became the theatre's chief director and remained as such until the end of her professional career.

Two testimonies to Lācis's life can be found in her personal file, started in October 1948 and available in the state archive in Valmiera. The first, dated April 19, 1948, and written and signed in Lācis's handwriting, is an autobiography in Russian, to which some additions were later made, seemingly in 1955, in the same handwriting but a different colour of ink. The most intriguing is the part devoted to the seeming black spot on the Soviet artist's biography: her arrest and deportation. The original text reads: "In 1938, I was arrested by NKVD organs and by special decision I was sentenced to 10 years in a labour camp [...] in Karlag Dolinka. In Karlag Dolinka Burma, I worked as the club theatres' artistic manager and director for 10 years. [...] Now I am working as the director of the Valmiera State Theatre, and I have been elected chairman of the local committee" (VZSA 888/3/25).² In 1955, this text is supplemented with a sentence written between the lines "The fact that I was sent to the camp turned out to be a court mistake," and the position of "director" is supplemented with an epithet "main," but at the bottom of the page, under the signature and date, another sentence has been added: "Rehabilitated by the order of the USSR Supreme Court Military college on August 13, 1955" (VZSA 888/3/25). Karlag or Karaganda Corrective Labour Camp was one of the largest such camps in the USSR during the period from 1930 to 1959.

The second biographical document is an employee form (VZSA 888/3/25), filled out by Lācis on November 15, 1955, in which she again confirms that between 1938 and 1948, she worked as an artistic director in Dolina, later Burma Central club in Kazakhstan. Her party affiliation indicates "non-partisan," and for her family status, she mentions only her daughter Dagmāra. By then, Bernhard Reich had already been living in Valmiera for four years, although there were no legal ties between him and Lācis at the time.

Valmiera is one of the oldest Latvian towns and is located in the north of the country, about 100 km from the capital Riga and about 50 km from the neighbouring country of Estonia. A professional theatre had been operating in Valmiera since 1923, but due to modest material and technical opportunities and a semi-professional theatre troupe, the theatre was forced to mainly focus on touring around Latvia, often with several productions at the same time, until the end of the 1960s. During the post-war period, the income of theatres, and thus also the execution of socialist plans, depended on the number of spectators; however, compulsory ideological Soviet plays did not and could not attract the necessary numbers. The Valmiera Theatre faced particular challenges at the end of the 1940s when post-war difficulties turned these trips into struggles for survival, trying to dig a path through deep snow for a truck or a bus, starting a performance at 10 pm or even later, and afterwards sleeping on wet straw or returning to Valmiera at 4 or 5 am. Between 1948 and 1953, Valmiera Theatre saw a change of six directors, which can be explained both by its catastrophic economic position and, in some cases, the directors' reluctance to submit to absurd Soviet requirements. In this situation, Lācis's temperamental and decisive character, harsh past life experience, pre-war theatre work experience in Germany, Russia, and Latvia, and persistent left-wing belief system made her an ideal theatre manager.

In practice, Lācis's purposeful work during this period has three dimensions. First, she assured an ideologically "correct" repertoire. During the eight and a half years she worked in Valmiera, Lācis staged 29 productions, an average of three or four productions per season. She made her debut with the Latvian Soviet author Anna Brodele's play *Teacher Straume* in December 1948, while her last production was the German classic, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*. These titles demonstrate the amplitude that can be seen in Lācis's work of this period. Most productions were based on drama that placed ideology above aesthetics, including both local domestic socialist realist examples (three of Brodele's, two of Vilis Lācis's, and one of Arvids Grigulis's works), and the new Russian Soviet drama, which played all over the USSR (for example, plays by multiple Stalin prize laureates Elmars Grins, Sergey Mihalkov, and Boris Lavrenov), as well as Latvian and Russian classics that were easy to adapt to the needs of the new ideology (such as Alexander Ostrovski's *A Profitable Position* and *The Forest*, and Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector*), and plays by Lācis's acquaintances from her youth, including Paegle's *Bat from the Bag!* and Alexander Afinogenov's *Mother of Her Children*. However, the director's experiments with constructivism and expressionism in her youth left a trace. Lācis was not interested in dry "production plays," which is why she also chose more exotic stories that reveal the spread of socialist ideas in the world, including two of Estonian author August Jakobson's plays, *Three Captains* and *Jackals*, Belorussian Andrey Makoyonok's *Excuse-Me, Please*, American Howard Fast's *Thirty Pieces of Silver*, and especially, Korean author (living in Kazakhstan) Thai Djan Chun's play *South of the 38th Parallel*, in which the main role of a young Korean freedom fighter was given to Ruta Birgere (born in 1924), who made her debut in 1950 and today is the oldest Latvian

actress who is still active.

Perhaps the most demonstrative example of the role of the main director in the policy-making of repertoire occurred on April 8, 1954, during a meeting of the Theatre Artistic Council, at which the members were to decide who should be rewarded with a business trip to Moscow. The actor Arturs Kalejs proposed deciding based on “who has not yet been there and who deserves a trip” (VZSA 888/2/8). Lācis immediately replied, “I volunteer for the trip. I have to go to Moscow at least once a year; otherwise, I cannot hold the repertoire line in our theatre” (VZSA 888/2/8). The director Peteris Lucis tried to object: “Comrade Lācis alone has been going to Moscow during all these four years” (VZSA 888/2/8). Lācis called Lucis’s statement a lie, and at the end of the meeting, the council decided to grant her the trip. This decision was not only a matter of appropriate rhetoric but also a practical action: as the main director, she needed to keep her finger on the pulse of current Soviet theatre. The fact that Lācis managed to adapt a few classic works to the new system’s demands was also confirmed at almost every meeting devoted to questions of repertoire planning. For example, in a May 25, 1954 discussion of *Love is Stronger than Death*, a play by the Latvian national romantic poet Rainis (1865-1929) that Lācis directed, Lācis said: “In the finale of Rainis’s play, there is an intonation of all-forgiveness, which I don’t acknowledge. It is alien to the heroic tragedy, but also to the development of Rainis’s logic. On behalf of the clarity of idea, I have removed this all-forgiveness intonation [...] In each era we look at the classic works with a psychosocial assessment of our era” (VZSA 888/2/8).

The appearance of two plays by Henrik Ibsen, a prominent Western author, in the repertoire of the Valmiera Theatre in the mid-1950s, indicates a certain courage on the part of the theatre directors. In 1955 Lācis staged *Ghosts*, and in 1956 Reich directed *Hedda Gabler*. During the council meeting on March 19, 1955 to discuss *Ghosts*, Lācis outlined her understanding of the play, giving an impression of foregrounding the anticlerical motif with Oswald as a confirming protagonist:

We were interested in Ibsen’s *Ghosts* because of its delicate way of unmasking bourgeois laws, lifestyle, and opinions. This lifestyle, which is based on church dogmas, goes against the people and is a crime against humanity. [...] Mrs. Alving, with Oswald’s help, slowly liberates herself from church dogmas. It is a subtle way of making anti-religious propaganda. [...] In Oswald’s character we want to show mental purity, love of life, optimism, hatred of hypocrisy, philistinism. He wants to fight, search for an exit. (VZSA 888/2/9)

One of the Soviet functionaries present, probably not convinced by the possibility of such an interpretation, asked the director a control question: “How does the director plan to justify Oswald’s drinking and the noise in the next room?” (VZSA 888/2/9). Lācis replied, “Ibsen hasn’t envisaged it as a bad characteristic. When he wants to kiss Regina, it’s because he wants to marry her. Oswald is in a depression, and that’s why he drinks a couple of glasses” (VZSA 888/2/9).

There is a question of whether Lācis, who considered herself practically the only successor in Latvia of Brecht’s tradition, had ever planned to stage one of Brecht’s

plays herself. On July 24, 1956, three weeks before Brecht's death, during a Valmiera Theatre artistic council meeting (VZSA 888/2/10), Lācis actually did suggest doing one of Brecht's plays instead of Friedrich Schiller's *The Robbers* as planned. During the council meetings on September 13 and 19, 1956, one month after Brecht's death, a specific play was mentioned: *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Unfortunately, the idea was never realized, and so Lācis never staged any of Brecht's plays.

Lācis addressed the public's ideological education with her first post-war performances because she believed that "An active spectator's education is part of the Soviet theatre's urgent tasks" (Miglāne et al. 230). The theatre's self-evaluation report also stresses that it was thanks to Lācis's work that "State Valmiera Theatre stood on a strong realistic basis and dealt with significant social psychological problems. If in 1947 the theatre visited 30-40 towns and villages and had 27,200 spectators, then in 1950 the theatre performed in more than 100 different places in the Republic and the number of spectators reached 48,600" (VZSA 888/1).

There are different ways of working with spectators. Lācis considered that audiences should be prepared for a performance and, to some extent, should become co-creators of the performance. Therefore, on the day of the premiere, the theatre would publish informative and explanatory articles on the author of the play and its ideological content in the Valmiera newspaper. Educational presentations were read right before the performance, and public rehearsals were organized in kolkhoz clubs and schools, after which the audience was invited to express their opinion and discuss the play with the actors. After the performances, audience conferences were organized, in which the actors responded to the audience's questions about the performance. To obtain feedback, the theatre asked for written reviews at all touring performing venues. The Vidzeme zonal archive in Valmiera includes several thick folders containing audience feedback from different places in Latvia. The reviews vary from ones spread across several pages to only a couple of sentences written on a half-stripped notebook page.

Third, Lācis's direction in Valmiera was linked to the organization of an inner microclimate. This direction proved the least successful for Lācis's sharp character. Several people attempted to express very strong opposition to Lācis's strict work and communication style during the meetings at different levels. First, Zhanis Vinkalns, whom Lācis replaced in the main director's position, clearly disagreed with her ideological belief and her working style. Lācis also regularly exchanged sharp words with the main theatre artist Rudolph Piladzis, and it seems that both sides had equally tempered characters. What was crucial for Lācis was her confrontation with the other theatre director, the classic psychological theatre master Peteris Lucis, which culminated in the spring of 1954 when two major productions were being staged at the same time: Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, directed by Lucis, and Rainis's tragedy *Love is Stronger than Death*, directed by Lācis. Friction between the directors began with role sharing and both directors claiming the same actors. Lucis hoped to keep the troupe united and tried not to become involved in the behind-the-scenes

fighters, even when Lācis harshly criticized the first reading of *Uncle Vanya*, and the troupe divided into supporters of Lucis's working style, or "*Lucians*," and supporters of Lācis's, or "*Lacians*." During a production meeting on May 12, 1954, Lucis gave a significant speech to the actress Vilma Liepina:

We Latvians have a proverb: "The more muck is made, the more it smells." You, Comrade Liepina, are one of these muck stirrers. You listen and accept everything that you hear and by doing that, you promote all of this. By adopting information and passing it on, you are like a wasp that stings. Why does no one bring me any news? Because I do not accept any. There won't be two groups in the theatre, Lācis's and Lucis's group, if Lācis and Lucis are against it. (VZSA 888/2/8)

In reality, however, at this point it was already clear that, although the staging of *Uncle Vanya* proved mediocre, Peteris Lucis's charismatic and tolerant personality and calm directing style, as well as the objective change in the mood of the epoch, also brought an inevitable change in the management of the Valmiera Theatre. In 1957, Lācis retired, and Lucis became the Valmiera Theatre's main director, a position he held for the next forty years.

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The artistic value of Lācis's productions in Valmiera may have been conventional, but her energetic working style and her passionately expressed ideological conviction in the Latvian Soviet theatre, expressed in words at the beginning of the 1950s, was historically appropriate.

BERNHARD REICH AND HIS THEATRICAL ACTIVITIES

Turning to Lācis's companion, Bernhard Reich, we find that his professional and personal lives were no less noteworthy than those of his vivid companion. Reich is one of the best known figures on the left-wing German theatre scene of the 1920s and 1930s. He was a close friend of Max Reinhardt, Erwin Piscator, and especially Bertolt Brecht. His sharp mind and intelligent personality were broken by the historical collisions of the first half of the twentieth century, which saw him move from aristocratic Vienna to the metropolises of modernist theatre in Berlin and Munich, before finally arriving in the USSR in the 1920s and living out his days in Soviet Latvia.

Reich was born in Moravia two years after Lācis, in 1894. Like many secular Jewish families in the region, his family moved to Vienna, where Reich received a good classical education and studied law at the University of Vienna. From 1914 to 1919, he was a director at the New Theatre and the German People's Theatre in Vienna, staging plays by Henrik Ibsen, Gerhard Hauptmann, Frank Wedekind, and Friedrich Hebbel. In 1920, Reich was invited to Reinhardt's German Theatre in Berlin, where he worked as a director for four years. During the 1923-24 season, he worked at Munich's Chamber Theatre, where he met Brecht, who was at the time reworking material for Reich's production of Alexander Dumas's *The Lady of the Camellias*. Reich was one of the creative co-authors of Brecht's play *Man Equals Man* (1925).

In 1922, Reich met the young Latvian director Lācis, whom he introduced to the German theatre scene and who changed the course of his life. Lācis had come to Germany from Latvia to learn about German theatres, and Reich was well placed to help her do that. Lācis spent three years in Germany before returning to Latvia for a short while, and then in 1926 went to meet Reich, who was by this time already in the USSR, in Moscow.

From 1926 until the beginning of World War II, Reich lived in Moscow, publishing articles in both the German and Russian press. He became one of the leading professors at the Moscow State Institute of Theatre, the Faculty of Theatre Direction, and gave lectures on German and world theatre history. He was a member of the USSR Writer's Union, the Russian Proletarian Writer's Association, and the Young Directors Association, and was also one of the leaders of the Association of International Workers' Theatres. When Lācis was arrested in 1938, Reich was released from his teaching position and not allowed to lecture or publish his work. He could only keep his job in the archive of the Theatre Institute. At the beginning of the war, Reich was evacuated to Tashkent, where in January 1941 he was arrested. He spent the next ten years in the Aktjubinska camp in Kazakhstan. At the beginning of 1951, Reich was released and moved to Latvia, where he lived together with Lācis, first in Valmiera and then in Riga.

Lācis's and Reich's private relationship began soon after their first meeting in 1922 and continued until Reich's death in 1972. Although they officially only married in 1957 and Lācis's vivid femininity attracted many representatives of the opposite sex, even Lācis, towards the end of her life, had to admit the significance of Reich's personality for her life: "We had a similar view on the world; we were both able to love only once. All those Brechts, Laicens, and others came to me, but I did not need them because I had Reich with me. We lived together for almost fifty years, missing only two weeks" (Оклянский 4).

Reich's creative work in Latvia during the last twenty years of his life moved in three directions: theatrical performances, critical and theoretical papers, and personal correspondence. In 1956, Reich staged Ibsen's play *Hedda Gabler* (starring Marija Adamova or Inga Kaleja) at the Valmiera Theatre. At the time Lācis was the artistic director of the theatre, and that this opportunity for Reich to return to theatre was her doing is confirmed both in her letters and in vivid discussions of the repertoire programming at Valmiera Theatre meetings. His production of *Hedda Gabler* did not enjoy a wide resonance. It mostly remained in the actors' memories as an atypical experience for Valmiera in the 1950s, working with the calm, tolerant Reich, who analysed every character in detail, looking for a psychological reasoning for their actions. Reich's second staging was in Riga. In 1969 he was a scriptwriter for actress Ilga Zvanova's solo performance at the Riga Philharmonic of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, based on Brecht's play. Lācis was the official director, but in reality, the staging was a collaboration between Reich and Lācis:

We think that one actor's theatre has an advantage compared to other genres in the sense that we ourselves and the audience can be strongly focused on a narrowly defined range of topics and themes. [...] We opted to use the word as a key mediator between the stage and the audience. If words reveal meaning, make it easy to understand, then we were able to stimulate the spectator directly with Brecht's rich text which creates the most diverse emotions. (Miglāne 139)

Only the actress and the pianist were on the stage during the whole performance, which could be considered more of a reading of a play than a performance.

64 In the 1960s and 1970s, Reich published reviews of Latvian theatre productions and articles about foreign drama in the *Karogs* journal and in a number of newspapers, including *Padomju Jaunatne*, *Ciņa*, and *Literatūra un Māksla*. These articles reveal his wide knowledge of literary history and theatre theory, of an atypically large foreign drama and theatre context, and even of polemics with Socialist Realist dogma. For example, in his 1967 article "Foreign Drama and Us," Reich describes plays that had been neither staged nor published in the Soviet Union, noting that Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Jean Paul Sartre's *The Condemned of Altona* have been "disqualified as modernist [...] to protect us from the harmful influence of modernism" (*Aizrobežu* 12). Instead of criticizing these plays according to the prevailing ideology, Reich defends them, using their "anti-fascist line" and the constricted understanding of realism in Soviet literary studies as an argument:

By realism, do we understand literature that is based on the force of truth when portraying people and things, or does realism require a specific way to show this truth, that is, a way which portrays life as similar to real life or even completely equal to it? Can we identify realism with the realistic style, or are its frames larger? [...] Since we are talking about the Socialist Realist method and not the style, clearly, the force of truth is needed, but the question of the type of portrayal remains open. It is important that socialist realist literature would portray the things as they are, and it is not important to depict them in the way they look like. [...] Based on a mistaken view that realist style and realist method are inseparable, all modern portraying techniques that depict the look of the things loosely are considered anti-realistic. (*Aizrobežu* 12-13)

This reasoned rhetoric likely does not indicate Reich's naivety in trying to prove the compliance of highly unrealistic texts to the parameters of realism, but his intuitive ability to use the terminology of literary theory (method—style) to make officially illegal works, if not legal, then at least available. He uses a similar approach in 1968, writing about the one-sided characters in Soviet plays. He first gives a Freudian description of a human personality: "We look at the human as a microcosm, a complex. In it, there are connected consciously created and consciously becoming impulses and mental reactions deeply hidden in the psyche, yet still powerful outbursts, excitements, inspirations, signals that might have unpredictable consequences. A human has very personal thoughts, feelings, emotions, but also very customary, automated, like reflexes, collective group judgements or prejudices that have been inherited" (*Daži vārdi* 4). Afterwards he presents an ideologically "right"

assessment of Freud's theory following a completely opposite and very concrete definition of the unconscious: "Freud's world view and theory are wrong and misguided, but we can't deny that there are psychological influences the origins of which we are not aware, that there are residues of memories and adventures, lost to memory, which are effective, active. I think that a writer who wants to do psychological studies should bring this into the daylight and decrypt it" (*Daži vārdi* 4).

Reich published a number of advanced essays on drama and criticism theory questions in the journal *Karogs*, including "About Documentary Literature" (1969), "About Criteria in Criticism" (1969), "Hegel and Brecht's Theatre" (1970), "The Development of Industrial Drama at Valmiera Drama Theatre" (1971). In 1960, Reich published a short essay called "Brecht," which was the first comprehensive study of Brecht in Moscow. In 1970, a longer and more significant work appeared in German, *Im Wettlauf mit der Zeit* (*In a Race with Time*). Apart from personal memories, in this book Reich offers a broad analysis of the theatre models of four German directors: Max Reinhardt, Leopold Jessner (1878-1945), Erwin Piscator, and Bertolt Brecht, as well as the work of the excellent German actors Josef Kainz (1858-1910), Alexander Moissi (1879-1935) and Albert Bassermann (1867-1952). Reich should be considered one of the most significant German theatre theorists of the mid-twentieth century because he tested his theoretical knowledge in the practical staging of works.

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From 1922 until the end of her life, Lācis also wrote a great deal about the theatre and questions on drama, especially German political theatre and Brecht. In a subjective and emotional portrait of her mother, *Asja: The Stormy Life of Anna Lācis* (1996), her daughter Dagmāra suggests that the well-educated, intelligent Reich was an important co-author of Lācis's books:

At the time, in Moscow [...], mother and Reich sat down at the manuscript of *German Revolutionary Theatre*. [...] Every evening the same scenario repeated. Reich was dictating; Asja was writing. Then they began arguing. First, such passive writing was not in Asja's nature. Second, of course, she knew the content—she knew the people, she herself had participated in much of the German revolutionary theatre. Sometimes, they were both shouting loudly but then slowly calmed down, and Asja became quiet—she wasn't stupid and understood that Reich was right; he was digging deeper. He was again dictating; Asja was writing. I assume that the book could have come out with the names of two authors on its cover, but the author was only one. (Kīmele and Strautmane 137)

Without a detailed analysis of specific texts, it is not possible either to confirm or to deny this assumption. However, it might not be without a foundation, as we see in the third part of Reich's creative work: his correspondence.

The writer Andrejs Upits's memorial museum in Riga holds more than 140 letters and postcards written by Reich and addressed to Lācis, as well as Valmiera Theatre actresses and Lācis's and Reich's family friends Marija Adamova-Kalnina and Vilma Liepina, dating from the period of December 1949 to March 1969. Until the beginning of 1951, these letters are from the period of his deportation in Aktjubinsk, while the ones that follow are mostly from Moscow. Only about twenty of Lācis's responses

are in the museum, which does not mean that these are the only ones, because Lācis's and Reich's archives are divided among several Latvian museums. Reich's letters address both professional and private questions. With regards to professional matters, Reich mostly describes in detail the theatre productions he has seen, books he has read, and people he has met, and communicates his ideas and intentions. For example, in the letters written during his deportation, between 1949 and 1951, one can find analyses of several plays that Lācis was directing at the Valmiera Theatre, including Elmars Grins's *Wind from the West*, Boris Lavrenyov's *Voice of America*, Aleksei Arbuzov's *Six Nice People*, Sergey Mikhalkov's *The Lost Home*, and August Jakobson's *Three Captains*. We can conclude from these letters that Lācis sent the plays to Reich, and he replied with detailed explications. All the plays named in the letters are typical Soviet plays of the time that were staged everywhere in the USSR during the early post-war years. Thus, Reich's surprisingly deep interest in the very primitive characters and situations of these plays can be explained by the situation in

66 which he found himself at the time: in the harsh conditions of the camp, the letters were his only chance to be in the world of theatre and drama, and at the same time feel as though he was working together with his beloved Asja. Therefore, although Lācis was staging the plays in Valmiera, Reich provided directorial notes. Reich's letter of November 18, 1949 is significant in this context, as he congratulates Asja on the premiere of Carlo Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters*: "I am proud of you and also myself because some part of me lives in you and your work" (AUMM 19984-1).³

Reich's letters also reveal details of his private relationship with Asja, which underpinned their mutual love of the theatre. Considering the intimate character of the correspondence, there is no reason not to believe its content: Reich's attitude toward Asja is full of unconditional love, constant care, and interest in her health, mood, and work; for the remainder of his life, each letter ends with the words "I love you, kiss you, miss you," and the signature *Der Junge* (the boy). A striking example of the symbiosis of these two artists' different personalities can be seen in Reich's letter, written from deportation, on May 13, 1950:

I completely understand and feel how, during tense creative periods, you crave a warm gaze and a word from someone close to you, how you feel the need to share with him your success and excitement; in other words, the need of physical intimacy with someone close to you tends to materialize with all its strength. But it seems to me that with years (both in terms of our age and the length of our relationship) love more and more acquires intellectual and friendly features. Yes, I can only say that you chose the correct tone when you started to write in detail about your work, your problems, when you came to me for advice, for an explication of different artistic problems. With the greatest readiness, joy, and love I read your letters and answered them. They became a necessity for me, and I was excited to know that after my return I would find you, a person close to my heart who has helped me. [...]

I think that, under the weight of impatient expectations, you have given yourself to the wish to confirm the good, beautiful harmony that has arisen between us and has overcome several thousand kilometres with a physical intimacy.

You really, really want to see me with your own eyes! I'm afraid I can no longer offer

you a particularly tempting view [...] Time has left wrinkles on my forehead, and grey hair on my head. When I look at myself in the hairdresser's mirror and search the signs of aging, I am particularly frustrated with my face—the freshness feels washed away.

Meetings are allowed, but only for 40-60 minutes, I have no doubt that you would manage to get a second meeting. But from my experience, I can say that these meetings which end exactly when you have found the real tone, only leave a terrible frustration which only further increases the thirst and does not ease it. Of course, even though in the beginning of separation these meetings are helpful, when the end is already visible [...] I am ashamed of the thought that instead of repairing your nerves and health and saving your creative energy, you want to rush through all of Russia to our steppe [...] and overcome all the difficulties of the trip, staying in the city and stress. But if your heart still says yes, then do it. (AUMM 19984-8)

These pages, covered in lines written in Reich's small handwriting, where he often switches several times from German to Russian and back again, not only within the same letter but sometimes even within a single paragraph, present an exciting adventure for any researcher and deserve to be published. They also establish the strength of the connection between Reich and Lācis and the importance of the theatre to that connection.

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NOTES

1. In 1914, she married the Latvian Julijs Lācis (1891-1941), who later became a writer and a politician. She adopted her husband's last name and kept it until her death, although they divorced after five years of marriage.
2. VZSA: Vidzeme Zonal State Archive (Vidzemes zonālais valsts arhīvs), reference to fond and inventory number.
3. AUMM: Andrejs Upits' Memorial Museum (Andreja Upīša memoriālais muzejs), reference to fond and inventory number.

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