

THE UNKNOWN HISTORY: BERNHARD REICH'S MANUSCRIPT ABOUT VALMIERA THEATRE

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Abstract

Latvian theatre director Anna (Asja) Lācis and her life partner, German theatre director and theoretician Bernhard Reich, began their professional careers in Latvia and Germany in the 1920s during the period of European modernism. During the second half of the 20th century, the paths of both their private and professional relationships lead them to the Soviet Union – a place whose ideological system and theatre they remained intertwined with for the rest of their lives. Both artists were then directly affected by Stalinist repressions. In 1948, Anna Lācis returned to Latvia and began working at Valmiera Drama Theatre. In 1951, Bernhard Reich also moved to Latvia, which remained his place of residence until his death. Both internationally recognized artists were buried at the Rainis Cemetery in Riga. This article provides insight into Bernhard Reich's unpublished manuscript titled *Valmieras teātris* (Valmiera Theatre), which reveals the left-leaning western artist's perspective of the history of Valmiera Theatre in the 1950s and the 1960s as well as the art of Socialist Realism that was both surprising and, at the time, unheard of in the history of Latvian theatre.

Keywords: *Bernhard Reich, Anna (Asja) Lācis, Valmiera theatre, theatre history.*

Anna (Asja) Lācis (1891–1979) and her life partner Bernhard Reich (1894–1972) were born in the late 19th century and began their professional careers right after the World War I, during the period of European modernism in Germany and Latvia. For a short period of time in the early 20th century, director Anna Lācis experimented with Expressionist and Constructivist theatre. Meanwhile, Austrian-Jewish director and theatre theoretician Bernhard Reich had already established himself as one of the most important figures of the 1920s German-speaking world, having worked alongside such brilliant German directors as Max Reinhardt, Erwin

Piscator, and Bertolt Brecht and having produced plays in cities such as Vienna, Berlin, and Munich. Reich initially met Anna Lācis in Berlin in 1922, where the young Latvian director had been visiting with the goal of learning about German theatres, and Reich was happy to accommodate her. Anna Lācis subsequently spent three years in Germany and returned to Latvia for a short period of time, only to be reunited with Reich again, but this time in the Soviet Union – a place whose ideological system and theatre life they remained intertwined with until their deaths in the 1970s. Both artists, however, were also affected by Stalinist repressions: from February 1938 till January 1948, Anna Lācis was imprisoned at the Karaganda Corrective Labour Camp, also known as the Karlag, while from March 1943 till January 1951, Bernhard Reich was incarcerated at a camp in the Aktyubinsk region of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. After their release, both of them ended up in Soviet Latvia – Lācis returned back to her homeland first, and Reich reunited with his loved one a few years later in a land that was completely foreign to him. They spent the remainder of their lives there and were buried at the Rainis Cemetery in Riga.

The distinct personality and work of Anna Lācis have been periodically brought up in various studies in the context of the history of Russian and German Marxist theatre movements of the 1920s and the 1930s, which was when she and Bernhard Reich developed personal and professional relationships with the most influential contemporary European artists and thinkers. Asja's work at Valmiera Theatre after the World War II has also been documented¹. A lot less, however, is known about Bernhard Reich, who from 1926 up until the World War II lived in Moscow, published his work both in German and Russian press, became one of the leading professors in the Faculty of Directing at the Moscow Institute of Theatre Arts in the 1930s, gave lectures on German and world theatre history, was a member of the Writers' Union of the USSR, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, and the Young Directors Association, and was also one of the leaders of the Association of International Workers' Theatres. Reich moved to Latvia at the beginning of 1951 after his release from the camp. From that point onward, he lived together with Asja in Riga and Valmiera and, during the summertime, also in their summer house in Murjāņi. However, after Stalin's death and his own official rehabilitation in 1956, Reich spent a lot of his time in Moscow where he wrote books, worked at the dramaturgy chapter of the Writers' Union of the USSR, and, at the request of his childhood friend Bertolt Brecht, was responsible for editing the first Russian translation of a selection of Brecht's plays.

¹ Refer to Pērkone-Redoviča, I. (ed.) (2015) *Kultūras krustpunkti* 8, Rīga: LKA; Ingram, S. (ed.) (2018) *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée: Critical Latvian Perspectives on Anna (Asja) Lacis*, Vol. 45.1.

A large portion of Reich's publicly known work comprises articles about theatre and dramaturgy, which were written before and after the World War II both in Russian and German, as well as three books: a monograph about Bertolt Brecht, written in Russian and titled *Brecht (Брехт, 1960)*, a memoir titled *A Race against Time: Memories of Five Decades of German Theatre (Im Wettlauf mit der Zeit, 1970)*, written in German, and its edited Russian translation titled *Vienna – Berlin – Moscow – Berlin (Вена – Берлин – Москва – Берлин, 1972)*. However, a lot more extensive and publicly unknown is Reich's unpublished literary heritage. For the most part, it consists of his correspondence with Asja¹ and a number of, at the time, influential Russian and German cultural workers, as well as stage play script drafts and theoretical articles on questions related to dramaturgy.

Portions of Reich's private archive are kept in museums in Riga, Berlin, and Moscow. Among the written material that can be found in Riga, specifically at Valmiera Theatre Foundation of the Museum of Literature, Theatre and Music, two examples of a typewritten manuscript titled *Bernhard's Reich's Valmieras teātris* ("Bernhard Reich Valmiera Theatre", one in Russian and one in Latvian) are particularly notable. Both manuscripts differ slightly in terms of page count (the Latvian version is 157 pages long, and the Russian version has 170 pages) but have the same content, differing only in terms of the specific nature of each language. Bernhard Reich did not know the Latvian language; his mother tongue was German, and after the World War II, he used Russian in his daily life. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the Russian version of the manuscript was originally written by Reich and the Latvian version was translated by an unknown author, most likely with the intention of releasing a book. The manuscript itself is unfinished. There is no date mentioned, however, the way the text cuts short suggests that it may have been left unfinished due to the author's death in 1972. Nevertheless, the intention is clear – the book is about Valmiera Theatre from the year 1948 up until 1957, when the head director of the theatre was Anna Lācis, but, in a broader sense, it is a subjective look at a period of time and theatre of which Reich himself was only a partial witness. It must be emphasized though that Reich only partially experienced the described events because, first of all, he arrived in Valmiera only in 1951 and, after 1956, spent long periods of time in Moscow, and, secondly, he did not know the Latvian language and was not directly involved with the internal affairs of Valmiera Theatre, hence most of his impressions were formed by Asja's stories and the plays he saw himself.

¹ For further information about Reich and Asja's correspondence from 1949 to 1951, refer to Ulberte, L. (2020). Annas Lācis un Bernharda Reihā korespondence: meklējumi un atradumi. In: I. Saleniece (ed.) *Vēsture: avoti un cilvēki*. XXIII. Daugavpils: DU akadēmiskais apgāds, pp. 289–294.

Nevertheless, the manuscript is a particularly interesting research subject, as it is a completely unknown account of Valmiera Theatre and Bernhard Reich himself. The rest of the paper outlines the main aspects of the manuscript's content, illustrating them with textual excerpts, which have been published for the first time.

- An important part of the manuscript is the paragraph that describes the feelings of its author – a repressed immigrant and an endangered foreigner – upon leaving exile through Moscow to Riga and then to Valmiera. It must be taken into account that Reich is travelling to a place that is completely foreign to him to meet a woman he has not seen in thirteen years. The following is an excerpt illustrating the meeting with Anna Lācis in Riga¹.

I had arrived in Riga. Asja's letter contained Daga's² address and detailed directions of how to get from the station to Lakstīgalu street. There was a small alleyway. I rather quickly managed to find the house, which was located behind a great cemetery. The apartment was bigger than most in Moscow at the time – three rooms. The two facing the cemetery were gloomy and dank. Stove heating. Both of Daga's daughters were home – the name of the eldest daughter was Gunta, and the youngest was called Māra. Māra immediately started goofing around and hugged me. When the older and more reserved Gunta noticed that I was happily allowing it, she also started fooling around. Both of them then asked me something in Latvian, but I couldn't understand a word. Finally, they managed to communicate to me that they wanted to play Hunter and Wolf. Both of them, of course, wanted to play the hunter, and I had to be the grey wolf – I already had the grey hair, so... We were playing, and the girls were cheering. Then Daga came back for dinner. She told me that Asja was on her way from Valmiera to Riga and that I had to wait. I waited... Asja arrived. We were reuniting after thirteen years of forced separation, each of us having lived several lifetimes during these years. The moment was so intensely saturated with internal drama that it seemed like the air around us would explode... Nonetheless, the meeting blended with the usual pace of our daily lives, maybe because both of us had changed so much.

Asja was wearing a checked coarse wool jacket and a funny-looking student hat. Her complexion looked healthy, her body looked stronger, and her facial features no longer had the softness they used to. I had grey hair, deep wrinkles on my forehead, and sharp lines around my mouth. I couldn't read without my glasses. In my mouth, there was a set of metal teeth. The two people who were saying their greetings by extending their hands towards each other were strangers. It would take time to recognize the familiar in the unfamiliar again. (..) It was an anxious time period. Checks were being made at

¹ For quotation purposes, translations of the Latvian version of the manuscript are henceforth used.

² Dagmāra Ķimele is Anna Lācis' daughter from her first marriage.

people's homes, and I was advised not to stay in Riga. Early next morning, I had to go to Valmiera alone. Asja described to me in detail the route from the station all the way to the stop that I had to get off at [Reihs n.d.: 2–3].

- An unrelenting sense of danger permeates the text when Reich recounts his initial years in Valmiera, specifically up until Stalin's death and the formal conclusion of the so-called Doctors' plot. The powerful and palpable fear of being deported again leaves neither Reich nor Asja.

The ones who had been released from the camps felt fear and unease – they had been free for only a few months, yet it became more and more common for their comrades in misfortune to receive orders to leave for exile in Siberia. Anna Lācis reckoned with that. It was probably the fame of her success and the high esteem that Andrejs Upīts held her in that saved her. My showing up complicated her situation. Even so, she had invited me to live with her and had used her authority to acquire a residence permit for me. (..)

It was most likely a Saturday because I had just returned home from a sauna, bringing back with me a small package. Across the town, radio loudspeakers were playing. I had grown accustomed to not listening to the venomous formulations we were being fed, when all of a sudden, a message caught my initially incredulous ear: The accusations made against the doctors are false and unsubstantiated... The doctors who were apprehended have been released... This news brought me joy. The Doctor's plot had caused a wave of antisemitism to roll over society. People looked with suspicion upon doctors of Jewish descent and refused to see them. Rumours had spread that all Jews would be deported to the Far East and that a decision had been made, which would be announced the next day or the day after that. Therefore, if the charges against the doctors had been dropped, deportation would also be out of the question. I rushed home to inform Asja of this development. She had already heard and hugged me. Admittedly, we had not discussed these horrors, but we were both aware of the grave danger that I had been in. The heavy load we had been carrying in our lives was lifted [Reihs n. d.: 47–48, 69–70].

- Reich saw Valmiera as a peripheral province to which a train would take four hours to get [Reihs n.d.: 3] and since childhood had known the town's German name: *As a young boy, I had read The History of the Thirty Years' War by Schiller diligently. How the small town of Wolmar, at which the battle between the Swedish and the Catholic armies took place, had managed to stay on my mind, I don't know. Believers in a higher power would see this as a sign of fate* [Reihs n. d.: 4]. Reich also makes frequent observations about the town, its residents, and its environment from an inherently urbanite point of view of a person who has lived in Vienna, Berlin, and Moscow. For example, he

marvelled at the little garden allotments that stood in front of every home. He also makes an interesting comparison between the buildings of Valmiera Theatre and St. Simon's Church, which historically have stood facing one another.

From the outside, the theatre resembled an elongated horse stable. Very unappealing. If by chance you were to enter, you would arrive at a pleasant lobby and an auditorium with the capacity to seat 400–500 people. The stage was spacious and suitable for crowded productions. The head director's office, however, was a narrow and comfortless room with dank walls resembling those of a prison cell.

The church stood on one side and the theatre on the other, like two enemies fighting for the souls of the residents. Since long ago, the church (and it was a beautiful church) has had an advantage due to there being no industrial enterprise in town, allowing the townsfolk to remain unaffected by industrial processes. There were a significant number of old women dressed in black roaming the streets, while in the big cities, they rarely leave their homes and, in a way, do not belong to the present. These women were aggressively disposed and knew how to keep their kids obedient. They, too, went to church [Reihs n. d.: 7–8].

- Reich had limited knowledge as well as pro-Soviet Union views regarding the history of Latvia as a free state, and it can be safely said that these views were his own and not just something he wrote, bearing in mind that his upcoming book could be censored. The dominant scepticism about the Soviet power among citizens, post-war confusion, and groups of national partisans who were hiding out in forests – this is the background that Reich sees as a challenge to Asja as head of Valmiera Theatre.

This unfortunate morally political situation was convenient for Asja. Her typical question “Who are you working for?” had acquired a firm and relevant meaning. She told me that I had to work for the good of the Soviet power so that these people, who were politically knowledgeable, would learn how to think politically and involve themselves in restoring the war-torn Soviet Latvia [Reihs n. d.: 7–8].

- In a similar way, Reich describes the specific character of Valmiera Theatre and its first post-war ensemble. A sense of arrogance can be detected in Reich's text, which probably has to do with what Asja had relayed to him about the goings-on at the theatre.

Parasitical elements prevailed (at the theatre); aesthetically they expressed themselves by rejecting political plays and longing to do plays about “the good old times”. In keeping with the low level, there was a longing for fake pearls, plays that would make

them cry, rude jokes that would make them laugh their heads off.. In short, a provincial public asked for provincial theatre. With regards to the actors, I currently do not feel like commenting on their professional capabilities, but I do want to comment on their character as people. For the most part, they were suspicious, compromised deportees. Priedītis used to be an incorrigible alcoholic, emphasis on “used to”. Martinsons and Muraška were legionnaires. Fergis, who joined the troupe later, had been in exile. Some others – Vīnkalns, Salduma – had worked in Valmiera before. Now, younger people were joining the core troupe, as well – Skudra, Adamova, Birgere, Cvetkovs, Misiņš... A very motley group. The actors characteristically knew little, read little, and had little desire to read. At the theatre, many of them only sought to find themselves as well as opportunities to express their interests, meaning they only wanted to play flattering roles in which they could show their “feelings” and utilize typical means that would make the audience nod in agreement: “Yes, now this is theatre” [Reihs n. d.: 16–17].

Reich particularly emphasizes the difficult post-war situation that Valmiera Theatre was experiencing as a partially travelling theatre, having to endure gruelling tours and insane work schedules.

Back in those days, community centres more closely resembled community fortresses. Unfortunately, in some places, they didn't meet the basic standards. The rooms were comfortless and unheated, and wind blew through the smashed windows. The actors despaired whenever they had to tremble in the cold, wearing light clothing, while performing in plays that were set during the summertime. It was difficult to assemble a cast of performers because they simultaneously were staging two plays, and they needed to be separated accordingly. Thus, during rehearsals, one group would be on stage, while the other – in the lobby or a pitifully looking rehearsal hall. It was inconvenient, but not the main problem. However, the fact that the ensemble would perform plays out of town and then return back to Valmiera for only a few days was a waste of everyone's acting energy. The days when the ensemble was back home had to be used to their full potential, therefore they were doing two rehearsals a day for eight hours. (..) Doing two rehearsals a day is very taxing for a director. Overexertion takes its toll, the nervous system becomes drained and cannot be refuelled... Besides that, the director has to systematically lead the workshops, analyse and lead the rehearsals, and develop new solutions. Basically, an eight-hour day turns into a sixteen-hour workday. The budget for this kind of travelling theatre was very limited. A particularly small amount of resources was allocated for costumes and decorations. There were enough of those for regular plays that took place in interior settings. (..) during the first years of operation, when the Soviet Union was busy undoing the consequences of war, there was a shortage of even the simplest thing, such as nails... [Reihs n. d.: 21–22].

- A large portion of the manuscript deals with the analyses of the plays Anna Lācis had staged in Valmiera. Reich also did this while in exile. Due to the fact that Asja was released sooner and started working in Valmiera in 1948, she started sending many of her Soviet plays to Reich, who was imprisoned at the Aktyubinsk camp, and he replied with extensive analyses of the plays. This portion of the text is of the least importance because it is devoted to ideological interpretations of works that are of low artistic value.
- Although the primary goal of the manuscript has to do with the analysis of the processes that took place at the theatre, inevitably a portrayal of the individual facets of his beloved Asja's personality appears in the text. For example, without any romanticization, Reich describes the harsh reality of Asja's daily life.

She returned back from the rehearsal very late – the difficulties of the tense morning rehearsal had long been forgotten – tired to death and without taking her clothes off, she fell into the bed and, not being able to sleep, told me about the small progress, but progress nonetheless, that she had made at the rehearsal, the tiny steps towards success. In a way, she was happy, yet at the same time she was exhausted, like the accused standing in front of a judge, staring at a bright light, eyes and nerves aching unbearably [Reihs n. d.: 24].

Reich also frequently points out the contradictions in Asja's character, for example, by outlining her relationship with her granddaughter, the up-and-coming theatre director Māra Ķimele.

Sometimes she (Asja) blames me for walking in straight lines too often and for being too uncompromising, in other words for not being an opportunist. By the way, here we encounter one of her characteristic contradictions. She “teaches” her granddaughter to be “smart” and not to express her personal opinions and sometimes even to act against her conscience as an artist if it contradicts the guidance of the Ministry of Culture too much (which isn't even remotely the Party). Māra responded, “So, at first, I have to lie just a little bit about small things. Then I will get used to the small lies and in time will graduate to bigger lies which I will not be able to shake off. Is that what you want?” Asja pensively made no reply [Reihs n. d.: 24].

- A large portion of the manuscript consists of analyses of individual aesthetic problems regarding dramaturgy and theatre, which was thematically motivated by a particular event that took place at Valmiera Theatre. Reich extensively describes the implementation of the Stanislavski method in Soviet theatre, addresses satire as a means of expression, which only appeared in

Soviet art after the condemnation of the cult of personality, analyses Spanish dramaturgy, which had unexpectedly gained popularity, and characterizes the works of specific playwrights and directors, etc. At some points in the text, there appear to be references to people who shared the same views as Reich during his younger years, of whom there has been little or no mention in the Soviet public sphere. For example, while reflecting on political theatre and the purpose of political art, Reich mentions both Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht.

Political theatre also has a moral and aesthetic component. The relationship between these elements can be very different. There are situations where the political directly contradicts the moral and the aesthetic, and there are situations when the moral and the aesthetic seem to be completely suppressed. However, there are also situations where the moral and the aesthetic are expressed clearly, and they form a distinct whole together with the political. In practice, that means that there are works or theatre productions that are very politically expressive, yet the aesthetic component is primitively rudimentary; they have been made by untalented and unartistic people (..) In his essay “The Author as Producer”¹, Walter Benjamin reasoned that it is pointless to debate whether or not a political play has to be of good quality and discussed how to determine whether or not it follows the correct political trend. This can either be an active political trend or just a mask. Therefore, a politically engaged writer needs to actively participate in the revolutionary movement. Benjamin definitely did not appreciate the hardships of such a development; however, it is forgivable because he would meet a fortunate specimen who is considered to be an exception, namely Brecht. In this regard, Brecht still to this day is an unattainable example [Reichs n. d.: 8–9].

Overall, Bernhard Reich’s manuscript *Valmiera Theatre* surprises with its paradoxicality. On the one hand, the text is very honest and contains diagnoses of discrepancies between the real life and the official slogans as well as criticism of Stalin and his associates, which the ideological censors wouldn’t have allowed to get published in the 1970s. On the other hand, a very ideological understanding of art governs text. Theatre and cinema researcher Valentīna Freimane (1922–2018), who shared a professional friendship with Lācis and Reich from the 1960s till the 1970s, told in an interview: *Reich was a nice person, but he was also an incorrigible maximalist and a dogmatist. He didn’t understand art that had nothing to do with the Soviet Reality. His growth had sort of halted: he was still the same leftist youth who was born to intelligent and rich parents and who had believed in the revolution. (..)*

¹ The essay of the cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1949) was written in 1934 and is dedicated to the phenomenon of proletarian culture.

Reich was insecure about his bourgeois roots. He thought that having been born to a bourgeois family was a genetic immorality. (...) I actually fought a lot with them during our final meetings. Reich and Lācis believed in a revival of the “Blue Shirts” and the revolutionary choirs – everything that was so interesting in the 1920s Germany. They kept trying to revive the revolutionary theatre, and in very direct ways at that. I told them, “Think about it. You’ll only be serving the Party’s slogans.” They told me that it wasn’t true and accused me of “suspiciousness and subversion”. It seemed to me that Reich understood what was happening and was troubled by it but didn’t want to admit it to himself [Альчук 2008: 172–173].

This then remains one of the most important questions in the context of researching the lives and art of Anna Lācis and Bernhard Reich – how one can explain the adamant loyalty they had to an ideology and a system, the inflicted repressions of which caused them both moral and physical suffering.

Sources

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