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Lithuanian Contexts of Aspazija's Historical Drama *Vaidelote*

Aspazijas vēsturiskās drāmas “Vaidelote” lietuviešu konteksti

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Lithuanian Evenings,
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Atslēgvārdi:

“Lietuviešu vakari”,
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gaidu horizonts

Summary

Aspazija's historical drama *Vaidelote* (Pagan Priestess; 1894), based on Lithuania's early history, was translated into Lithuanian in 1908 and staged several times by diaspora Lithuanian theatre amateurs in Riga and *Mitau* (now Jelgava). This paper aims to determine how the Lithuanian audience perceived it. The translation and staging of *Vaidelote* is a good opportunity to consider the tradition of Lithuanian dramaturgy in the context of evaluating this Neo-romanticist drama by Aspazija, and the influence it may have had on the Lithuanian historical drama of the time. The methodological approaches used here include the notion of the horizon of expectation, which comes from literary hermeneutics, and the model of theatrical communication by Susan Bennett, who has adapted the active reader response to the theatrical situation. These theoretical tools are discussed in the first part of the paper. The second part presents the situation of early Lithuanian theatre and its dramaturgy at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The third part is devoted to the translation of Aspazija's drama *Vaidelote* and its reception by Lithuanian audience. This paper concludes that Aspazija's drama entered the Lithuanian theatre scene after having been simplified and adapted to the limited possibilities of the amateur theatre of that time. Therefore, its influence on Lithuanian historical dramaturgy was limited.

Kopsavilkums

Aspazijas vēsturiskā drāma "Vaidelote" (1894), kas balstīta Lietuvas senvēstures notikumos, tika pārtulkota lietuviski 1908. gadā, un to vairākkārt iestudēja Rīgā un Jelgavā dzīvojošo diasporas lietuviešu amatiereteātri. Šī pētījuma mērķis ir izzināt, kā šo lugu uztvēra lietuviešu auditorija. "Vaidelotes" tulkojums un iestudējumi sniedz iespēju izvērtēt lietuviešu dramaturģijas tradīciju saistībā ar Aspazijas neoromantisma lugas izpratni, kā arī tās iespējamo ietekmi uz tālaika lietuviešu vēsturiskās drāmas žanra attīstību. Pētījumā izmantotā metodoloģija ietver gaidu horizonta jēdzienu, kas aizgūts no literārās hermeneitikas, kā arī Sūzanas Benetas izstrādāto teātra komunikācijas modeli, kur skatītāja aktīvā reakcija pielāgota teatrālajai situācijai. Šīs teorētiskās metodes tiek apspriestas raksta pirmajā daļā. Otrajā daļā aplūkots agrīnā lietuviešu teātra un dramaturģijas stāvoklis 19. gs. beigās un 20. gs. sākumā. Raksta trešā daļa ir veltīta Aspazijas drāmas "Vaidelote" lietuviešu tulkojumam un recepcijai. Visbeidzot tiek secināts, ka šī Aspazijas luga uz lietuviešu teātra skatuvēm nonāca vienkāršotā veidā, pielāgota tālaika amatiereteātra iespējām. Tādēļ tās iespaids uz lietuviešu vēsturisko dramaturģiju bija neliels.

Introduction

In 1891 Aspazija (Elza Rozenberga-Pliekšāne) wrote a five-act drama based on Lithuania's early history called *Vaidelote* (Pagan Priestess). Staged at the Riga Latvian theatre in 1894, it became a great success, "shining like a bright lightning bolt in the world of Latvian theatre" (Hausmanis 2016: 217)¹. *Vaidelote* was Aspazija's second drama, with which the already famous poetess gained the title of playwright. It became one of Aspazija's most staged plays in Latvia, and in 1927 it was also produced as an opera. The Lithuanian themes of *Vaidelote* immediately brought it to the attention of Lithuanian intellectuals: the surviving correspondence between Jānis Rainis and Eduards Volters, a lecturer at the University of Saint Petersburg who worked as a censor of Lithuanian writings, testifies to the fact that Volters had suggested to the Lithuanians of Saint Petersburg to translate and stage this drama even before 1899: "I have long encouraged the Lithuanians to translate Aspazija's drama from the history of Lithuania, they have costumes and actors: everything is ready, but it is difficult to set our Lithuanians in motion" (Nastopka 1971: 151). Although the Lithuanian press of the late 19th and early 20th centuries repeatedly admired the Latvian performances of *Vaidelote* and rhetorically asked when the Lithuanian stage would finally see this historical drama, it was a long time before the artwork was translated and performed by the Lithuanian amateur theatre society *Kanklės* in Riga (1911, 1913) and Jelgava (1913). It should come as no surprise that the Lithuanian diaspora in Latvian cities had their own theater societies. At the end of the 19th century, Lithuanian migration to the industrial cities of the Russian Empire was particularly high, Lithuanians were especially attracted to the rapidly growing city of Riga. It is estimated that on the eve of World War I, over 37,000 Lithuanians lived in Riga. There were also large Lithuanian communities in Liepāja and Jelgava (Mačiulis, Jēkabsons 2018: 8).

Lithuanian reviews of the Latvian performances of *Vaidelote* also give us the impression that this historical drama remained on the minds of Lithuanian theatre lovers well into the early 20th century but, despite their efforts, it never became popular. The play was translated into Lithuanian in 1908 by the Riga amateur theatre maker Nepakentuolis (Povilas Žaldokas, c. 1858–1920), and in July of the same year the censors granted the permission to stage it. This fact was announced in the Lithuanian press by Lithuanian writer Ona Pleirytė-Puidienė. In an article presenting Aspazija's *Vaidelote* and *Skirmunda* by Laimnieks (Jēkabs Dravnieks), she noted:

1 The quotations in this article are translated by Aleksandra Fominaitė, unless otherwise noted.

Both “Vaidelote” and “Skirmunda” give extremely fine, strong scenes, both are adorned with songs and dances of specific festivities. The former and the latter works are in Lithuanian translations, it would be pleasant to see them one day on our stage, [for] there are no equally excellent originals in the literature of our stage. Both translations are still in manuscripts, so if any theatrical societies and individuals would like to get closer to these works, they can do so through the “Vilnius News” editorial office which will help them get in touch with the translators. (Pleiryte-Puidienė 1908: 2)

It is not only Pleiryte-Puidienė’s desire to see a Lithuanian production of *Vaidelote* that should be emphasized – it is also important to note that, according to the writer, original Lithuanian dramatic works were not equal to this play. It is possible that an attempt to stage Aspazija’s artwork on the Lithuanian stage was also made in 1909 when preparing the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the first Lithuanian public performance. It was planned that *Vaidelote* might be performed on the second day of the celebrations, but the organizers opted for a concert instead (Būtėnas 1940: 58–59).

Why did *Vaidelote*, despite its attractive themes, not become a popular production on the Lithuanian stage? In order to understand how this drama functioned in the Lithuanian context, we should consider the early stage of Lithuanian theatre and the audience’s expectations, which can only be determined by grasping what their amateur theatre was like. In other words, the state of theatrical communication was important, taking into account that for the Lithuanian audience of that time, the amateur stage was the only way to experience Aspazija’s artwork. Žaldokas’s translation of the play circulated as a manuscript and was never published. It survived only as a copy sent to the tsarist censors and is now preserved in the censorship fund of the Saint Petersburg State Theatre Library. Although there are many translations of Aspazija’s poetry into Lithuanian, only two excerpts of the drama were published in Lithuanian. Its first act was translated into Lithuanian by Arvydas Valionis (Aspazija 2018: 179–198), while one of the songs from the opera *Vaidelote*, the Lithuanian victory anthem, was included in the poetry anthology *The Immortal Land: Lithuania in the Verses of World Poetry* (Šešplaukis-Tyruolis 1970: 125)².

At the beginning of the 20th century, Aspazija was known to Lithuanians and appreciated as an exponent of new tendencies in Latvian literature: “Aspazija occupies the foremost place in the current of the recent literature, bringing to it a whole new vitality” (Volteris, Pleiryte-Puidienė 1908: 360), but detailed attention to her drama was still lacking. Aspazija’s *Vaidelote* was noticed by Lithuanians because of its Lithuanian themes, which is why its first Latvian production received a short review in USA Lithuanians’ weekly *Vienybė lietuvninkų* in 1894 (Kiszkis iš Kopustų

2 All of Aspazija’s works translated into Lithuanian have been registered by Regina Kvašytė (Kvašytė 2016: 285–286).

1894: 104). The Lithuanian topics were also emphasized later as the primary reason for noticing this drama (Žaibas 1904: 3). We can say that this tendency is still evident to this day, and it is precisely because of these themes that Alfonsas Šešplaukis-Tyruolis included a short discussion of this play in his collection of articles on the image of Lithuania and Lithuanians in world literature (Šešplaukis-Tyruolis 1985: 120–124). The drama has also been mentioned in the works of Lithuanian theatre scholars (Maknys 1972: 194), moreover, it has been presented in a study of the links between Lithuanian and Latvian literature. Kęstutis Nastopka briefly discussed Aspazija's drama in the context of 19th-century Latvian Romanticist literature on Lithuanian themes and provided a concise, but perhaps the most conceptual analysis of the work (Nastopka 1971: 77–79). *Vaidelote* also came to the attention of Vigmantas Butkus as a transitional work from the Romanticist to the Neo-romanticist paradigm in Latvian dramaturgy, although the literary scholar excluded it due to his chosen aspect of analysis – the relationship between the nation and the individual (Butkus 1997: 82–83). In general, Lithuanian works analyzing Baltic literatures more often discuss Aspazija's poetry (Gaižiūnas 1989: 161–165) and prose (Mykolaitytė 2004: 50–52; 68–70), rather than dramaturgy. Therefore, it can be stated that the reception of Aspazija's *Vaidelote* in contemporary Lithuanian literary studies is rather superficial, only partially presenting the meanings that the drama offers. For example, an aspect that is completely unremarked upon in the Lithuanian context and that is most emphasized by current Latvian scholars is the feminist stance of this writer and the creative work that it inspired. This is precisely the aspect highlighted in *Aspazija and Modernity: Gender, Nation, Creativity* – one of the most recent collective monographs devoted to the analysis of her biography and work: "[T]he study was carried out with a thematic orientation/perspective towards gender identity as the national cultural identity, the main object of the research and reflection being her literary creativity and personality" (Cimdiņa 2016: 439).

This paper aims to see *Vaidelote* through the eyes of its Lithuanian contemporaries and to understand why it was translated into Lithuanian, what was the most important factor for the Lithuanians who watched this drama, and why it never became popular on the Lithuanian stage. The methodological tools for this reconstruction are provided by looking at the horizon of Lithuanian theatre lovers' expectation – their perception of the possibilities of Lithuanian theatre at its early phase. The theoretical part of this paper therefore briefly introduces the concept of the horizon of expectation, as it is formulated in the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The theoretical conception of Hans Robert Jauss, who took over and developed the term, is also important. The concept of the horizon of the reader's expectation, which comes from literary hermeneutics, has been productively applied in theatre

communication research. This paper uses the model of theatrical communication proposed by Susan Bennett. The theoretical assumptions of such a framework are outlined in the first part of the paper. The second part presents the communicative structure of the Lithuanian Evenings, the early Lithuanian theatre that tried to assimilate Aspazija's drama, and subsequently relates it to the horizon of expectation of the Lithuanian audience and the repertoire of the Lithuanian Evenings at that time. The third part turns to the specific reception of Aspazija's *Vaidelote*: it considers its path to the Lithuanian theatre scene (translation, productions discussed in newspaper reviews), and its popularity in comparison to other Latvian theatrical works translated into Lithuanian. It also considers those works in Lithuanian historical dramaturgy which are the closest to Aspazija's play in terms of plot, and considers to what extent her text may have influenced Lithuanian playwrights.

The Horizon of the Theatre Audience's Expectation: Theoretical Assumptions

The importance of the theatre audience and the difficulties in describing its role are well expressed by two quotes from English director Peter Brook. On the one hand, as he puts it: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (Brook 1996: 9). On the other hand, despite the apparent necessity of the spectator, "[i]t is hard to understand the true notion of spectator, there and not there, ignored and yet needed. The actor's work is never for an audience, yet always is for one. The onlooker is a partner who must be forgotten and still constantly kept in mind" (Brook 1996: 51).

Traditionally, the audience was considered *hyper-passive*, performing the most minimal action imaginable – just passively watching, identifying with the dramatic action on stage (Ortega y Gasset 1999: 394). In the 19th century, therefore, the spectator was "disciplined": the audience was taught to behave in a "decent" manner, threatened with fines for misbehaviour (chattering, eating, making noise during the performance), and a curtain was hanged to separate the stage and the auditorium. The aim was not only to set the audience apart from the performers, but also to isolate the viewers from one another, so that the behaviour of other people in the auditorium would not interfere with one's inner reactions and one could fully identify with the spectacle (Erika Fisher-Lichte 2013: 62). In the 20th century, it was realized that the spectator's reception of performance is specific. Currently, in Western drama theatre the audience is indeed asked to behave passively: to sit and watch the

dramatic action unfolding in front of their eyes. However, at the same time the viewers are expected to interpret the spectacle in a very active way.

The changing attitude towards the spectator is also linked to the fact that schools of literary criticism have shifted their focus to the reader. The relationship between the work of art and its addressee emerged first in literary hermeneutics in the second half of the 20th century. Hermeneutics reminded us about the importance of the reading audience for literature, and of the social and historical context in which its meaning is perceived and shaped (Jurgutienė 2006: 34). According to the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, the meaning of a work of art is not objective and finite; it is rather constantly created and changed by its perceptions. Gadamer described interpretation as the convergence of the perspectives (horizons, contexts) of the text and the reader: interpretative meaning comes into existence as the result of the convergence and fusion of two horizons of understanding. Each time a work of art is perceived, the reader's horizon of expectation (German: *Erwartungshorizont*) is (un)consciously involved in the interpretation, which meets the horizon of meanings conveyed by the work – the artistically meaningful truth. Reading begins only after a critical evaluation of one horizon by another and opening a dialogue between them, and the most important question of reception criticism is: what does the work of art mean here and now? (Jurgutienė 2006: 37–47).

The notion of the horizon of expectation became central to the work of the German literary scholar Hans Robert Jauss, who focused on historical evaluations of readers and the ways they change. In his manifesto article *Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory* (1967), Jauss emphasizes the dimension of literary perception and its impact. Obviously, a work of art only exists because it is addressed to someone – being the addressee is seen as the reader's most important role, because "[a] literary work is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period. It is not a monument, which reveals its timeless essence in a monologue. It is much more like an orchestration, which strikes ever new chords among its readers and which frees the text from the substance of the words and makes it meaningful for the time." (Jauss 1970: 10). It is the perceiver who realizes the possible meanings offered by the artwork, depending on their personal experience and the norms of perception offered by the context.

Jauss modified the notion of the horizon of expectation taken from Gadamer by emphasizing the historical analysis of the perception and reading of the artwork. The horizon of expectation is a system of preconceptions and evaluations held by the reader: "[T]his frame of reference for each work develops in the historical moment of its appearance from a previous understanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the contrast between poetic and practical

language" (Jauss 1970: 11). According to Jauss, a work of literature cannot be a complete novelty – it is written in a certain context, evokes the memory of works already read, and is judged according to the rules or norms of the genre. The horizon of expectation also makes it possible to determine the impact of a work on its readers, because the distance between the horizon of readers' expectations and a new work is aesthetic, and is expressed in the various reactions of the public: spontaneous success, rejection, limited appreciation, gradual or delayed understanding.

The function of the audience in theatrical communication emerged in the 1960s as a problem for specialized theatre studies. The theatre scholars' gaze was directed towards the audience as the result of literary theories that emphasized the reader (this impetus was accelerated by film and television studies) and the theories of performance that became popular in the USA around this time, as well as the so-called performative turn whereby the performance aspect of a theatrical production was increasingly stressed (Šatkauskienė 2002: 93). This paper uses the model of theatrical communication elaborated by theatre scholar Susan Bennett. In the monograph *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (1990, 1997), she analyzes the role of the audience. The researcher looks at the structure of theatrical communication by extending her analysis to the concept of theatre as a social event. According to Bennett, the sociality of theatre is confirmed by the obvious fact that a performance is based on the shared presence of the audience, which is necessary for the artistic practice of a theatrical production to take place at all. Drawing on Bertolt Brecht's theoretical considerations and theatrical practice, the theory of the reader's response, and the ideas of post-structuralism, Bennett proposes a two-layered model of theatrical communication – consisting of the external and the internal frame or plane. The external frame of the spectator's experience is related to theatre as a cultural and social event; what is important here is how the spectators perceive the production as a social practice, what cultural attitudes they bring with them when they come to the theatre, and what social practices they associate with going to the theatre. The internal dimension of the audience's experience is related to theatricality as a specific aesthetic experience: it is the spectator's experience of observing a fictional world displayed on stage. It is the intersection of these two frames of the audience's theatrical experience (the external one of theatre as a sociocultural experience, and the internal one of the artistic aesthetic perception) and their interactive nature that form the specific reception of theatre.

The extent to which the audience will engage with the dramatic action on stage depends on the extent to which it is perceptible to the audience – that is, the extent to which the audience is capable of grasping the specific artistic language. Bennett's employment of Jauss's concept of the horizon of expectation becomes important in

this respect, as she argues that theatre audiences come to any performance with a certain horizon of cultural and ideological expectations. This horizon of expectation is never stable and is always tested by artistic reality (Bennett 1997: 98). Bennett, like Jauss, believes that a new or altered horizon of expectation can emerge in the interpretation of an artwork: "Cultural systems, individual horizons of expectations, and accepted theatrical conventions all activate the decoding process for a specific production, but, in turn, the direct experience of that production feeds back to revise a spectator's expectations, to establish or challenge conventions, and, occasionally, to reform the boundaries of culture" (Bennett 1997: 207).

This paper applies Bennett's model as a methodological tool in order to understand the communicative structure of the early phase of Lithuanian theatre. Only by presenting it will we be able to understand how Aspazija's *Vaidelote* could have been interpreted by the Lithuanian audience of that time. Moreover, the question is not only how Lithuanian audiences interpreted Aspazija's drama, but also whether (and how) the artwork itself changed the expectations of Lithuanian audiences. Did it influence Lithuanian playwrights of the time as they, starting from around the year of the translation of Aspazija's play into Lithuanian, also began to employ the plot of a chaste young maiden sacrificing herself for the sake of her homeland?

Lithuanian Evenings and Their Repertoire

The end of the 19th century was particularly unfavourable for the development of Lithuanian culture. After suppressing the 1863–1864 uprising, the Russian government repressed Lithuanian culture by banning Lithuanian printing in Latin letters, removing the Lithuanian language from schools, and forbidding its use in public gatherings. Therefore, the amateur theatre movement in Lithuania started more than two decades later than in Latvia. The number of censored copies of plays preserved in the Saint Petersburg State Theatre Library clearly illustrates the quantitative difference between the theatrical processes in Lithuania and Latvia. During the period from 1886 to 1917, only 320 Lithuanian theatrical works were sent to the tsarist censors for evaluation. Meanwhile, 1700 Latvian plays were sent to the Censorship Committee between the 1870s and 1917³.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact beginnings of Lithuanian amateur theatre, Riga Latvian theatre (*Rīgas Latviešu teātris*) was established as early as in 1870 under the leadership of Ādolfs Alunāns, the "father of Latvian theatre".

3 The documents related to early Latvian theatre in the Saint Petersburg archives have been reviewed by Alfons Vilsons (Vilsons 1950: 97–108).

The problem is that Lithuanian theatre, the so-called Lithuanian Evenings, began as a secret resistance to tsarist policies. The Lithuanian Evenings were a mass movement of Lithuanian amateur theatre lovers that began in the 1890s and lasted for about 30 years, taking place in the ethnographic territory of the occupied Lithuania and also encompassing the Lithuanian colonies in the major cities of the Russian Empire, as well as in emigration. The movement reached its peak in the first and second decades of the 20th century. Initially, Lithuanian Evenings were secret, but since the lifting of the ban on the press in 1904 they became public, although restricted by tsarist censorship. The conspiratorial nature of the plays was linked to a specific feature of these amateur performances: they began in the countryside, in secret, far from urban civilization, and thus did not experience a direct influence of professional theatre (Trinkūnaitė 2007: 28–29). The local Lithuanian-language gatherings of singing, reciting, dancing, and having fun together was eventually expanded to include short performed scenes, which later grew into the evening's main event – a performance. Another important characteristic of Lithuanian Evenings is their musical origin. In the first Lithuanian Evenings, the main part of the artistic program consisted of recitals accompanied by music and songs. The predominance of the musical element seems logical, given the fact that at that time the type of theatrical communication where the audience and the performers are strictly separated was still in its infancy. Singing and dancing allowed everyone to join in the artistic process, and thus the communicative structure can be seen as a transition between the unstructured communal fun and the strictly separated audience and performers.

Lithuanian Evenings were usually organized by students who had returned to the countryside for holidays, as well as by local intellectuals (doctors, priests) who also involved the more active villagers. The writer Balys Sruoga proposed a metaphorical assessment of the early amateur theatre activities, which has become well-established in Lithuanian culture: they are considered to be “a fusion of the black-earthiness and the university style” (Sruoga 1930: 11). The “black earth” dimension of theatrical communication refers to the audience's horizon of expectation, regarding the effort to bring the theatrical process closer to the recipient's understanding. This is the audience horizon of the early Lithuanian theatre, above all the forms of folk theatre on which the actors focused in their performances: theatrical entertainments, calendar ceremonies, and family rituals. The “university style” or “civilization” element should be linked to the organizational impulses behind the Lithuanian Evenings – i.e. the self-imposed task of the organizers of this innovative artistic communication to educate and develop their audience.

Memories of theatre lovers and newspaper correspondence from that period confirm that at the beginning the theatre communication did not always work

smoothly – i.e. the audience in the Lithuanian Evenings did not always perceive the performance as a distinctive type of artistic communication (for instance, the spectators gave their remarks to the actors and wanted to intervene in the action). At this phase of Lithuanian theatre, it was necessary to establish the very perception of theatre as such. Namely, to accustom the audience to theatre as a sociocultural event and to teach them the proper behaviour – how to watch the play together with others, in silence and without disturbing the other audience members and actors. Even more lacking was the spectators' ability to adequately perceive the fictional action being shown. For example, the press of the time often pointed out that the audience had laughed at the most tragic parts of the performance. Such reactions are understandable, because the inner dimension of the theatrical experience, the perception of the fiction shown on stage as a unique artistic process, was still in its infancy, and at first the audience was interested in the outer dimension of theatrical communication – theatre as a social and cultural event. Theatre lovers' recollections of plays from that period confirm that Lithuanian Evenings at that time were primarily seen as a cultural get-together. Lithuanian historian and literature professor Mykolas Biržiška, presenting theatre statistics from the first decade of the 20th century, notes: "[T]heatre [...] for us is a substitute for clubs. It is, still like in the old days, an opportunity to get together, to see each other, to talk about things. In that respect, it is an institution that has earned a lot [of respect – B. A.] in society" (Nuobodėlis 1913: 50).

Because of the immature state of Lithuanian theatre at that time, theatre scholars tend to emphasize the political and civic significance of the Lithuanian Evenings, rather than their artistic form. These performances disseminated the use of the native language (their name alone is noteworthy), inspired to participate in the national movement, and fostered national consciousness. In other words, in its first phase Lithuanian theatre was not a space for aesthetic communication, but an arena for propagating national ideas (Trinkūnaitė 2009: 38). In this respect, the memories of the writer Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė, who contributed to the preparation of the first Lithuanian public performance, are telling. In 1899, a performance of Keturakis's (collective pseudonym of Antanas Vilkutaitis and Juozas Vilkutaitis) comedy *Amerika Pirtyje* (America in the Bathhouse), which took place in Palanga, attracted many spectators. Bitė describes the powerful feelings that she experienced while watching the play: "It could not be called a celebration of fine art, because there was hardly any fine art then. It was a celebration of the nation in the true sense of the word, and of people who were happy to be alive and who together took a strong stance against the shackles that constrained them" (Petkevičaitė-Bitė 1927: 42). In this quote it should be noted that Bitė does not consider the play itself to be true art, but points out the enormous importance of hearing Lithuanian spoken from a stage in front of a community.

Lithuanian theatre began to professionalize rapidly when, after 1904, the emerging cultural societies gradually turned Lithuanian Evenings into regular performances. The organizers soon became aware of their limitations and began to worry about the artistry of the performances and how to ensure it. Public discussions raised questions related to the functions of the performance director, organizational peculiarities, and theatre criticism. What had suited the common people was no longer satisfactory for the intellectuals of the time, as the playwright Kazys Puida pointed out in one of his articles: "Our playing is barely enough for us today because aesthetic fineness has developed and matured much higher in us than we have the opportunity to show it to the general public" (K.P. 1906: 1). The discussion in the Lithuanian press about theatre matters that followed the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the first Lithuanian performance also marks a threshold from which Lithuanian Evenings were held to a much higher standard of professionalism⁴.

Looking at the earliest repertoire of Lithuanian Evenings, it is hard to believe that such a great emotional impact on the spectator was exerted by the simple, short, household-based comedies and plays which didactically depicted rural life. This discrepancy between the exciting, uplifting mood of a simple comedy and the audience's experience of watching it can be explained by the gradual development of theatrical communication. In the earliest period of Lithuanian theatre, the external dimension of the theatrical experience was created (collective viewing of a performance in Lithuanian), while the internal, specifically theatrical communication was primarily based on those forms of theatricality that corresponded to the horizon of expectation of the rural audience. They were associated with the theatricality perceived by the villager: comic scenes on the occasion of calendar feast days and family events, theatrical elements of rituals and customs, vivid typecasts, and external comicality. These forms were expressed by the simple play and the didactic comedy that the professional theatre people of the time called the repertoire of folk theatre. Therefore, the Latvian playwright Rūdolfs Blaumanis's evaluation of the contemporary original Lithuanian dramaturgy is understandable. When Blaumanis saw the play *Meilę Suardyti – Nuodėmę Pagimdyti* (To Break up Love is to Give Birth to Sin), written by Lithuanian playwright Marcelinas Šikšnys-Šiaulėniškis in 1899 and staged by the Lithuanians in Riga in 1900, he eloquently stated in the press: "If we compare our [Latvian – B.A.] dramatic literature to a blooming plant, then our neighbours' [Lithuanian – B.A.] drama would have to be compared to a plant that has just sprouted two soft yellow leaves from the ground" (Nastopka 1971: 96).

According to newspaper data, more than 130 plays had been performed in the

4 More about this see in Laura Blynaitė's paper (Blynaitė 2005: 46–48).

Lithuanian Evenings by 1910. They generally circulated as manuscripts, and only a few have been published. Two-thirds of them (about 80) were translated and adapted from other languages, mainly Polish (more than 30), but also Russian, Latvian, German, French, and Ukrainian (Nuobodėlis 1913: 50). The predominance of translated drama shows that original theatrical works were initially in very short supply. Alongside the realistic type of drama, at the end of the 19th century (around the time when Aspazija wrote her *Vaidelote*) historical patriotic plays began to be translated and subsequently also written in Lithuanian. However, it was not until 1906 that an original historically-themed Lithuanian drama was turned into a performance, because the amateur stage of the late 19th century was simply not logistically capable of producing a more complex historical play which, when put on stage, would have had to deal with the issues of massed scenes or conditional scenery. Marcelinas Šikšnys-Šiaulėniškis's poetic tragedy *Pilėnų Kunigaikštis* (The Duke of Pilėnai, 1905), based on a short story by the Polish writer Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, is the first original Lithuanian historical drama to be brought to the stage by the Vilnius *Kanklės* Society in 1906. This play became the most frequently staged work of historical themes of the time. Šikšnys's tragedy brought to the stage the plot pattern of castle defenders refusing to surrender to their enemies and committing collective suicide, which was also characteristic of other Lithuanian historical dramas of the time, such as Vincas Nagarnoskis's *Pilėniečiai* (The People of Pilėnai, 1908), Juozas Jakštas's *Pilėnų Jurgutis* (Dear Jurgis of Pilėnai, 1911), and other plays.

Historical Lithuanian dramaturgy was characterized by a romanticized conception of history adopted from Polish literature: the artistic imagination ignored historical authenticity and created a magnificent past of the Lithuanian nation that was shrouded in legends (Trinkūnaitė 2007: 37). These dramas drew their plots from Polish-language Lithuanian literature of the first half of the 19th century, and created idealized Lithuanian characters whose heroic attitudes and exploits were to serve as an example for the participants of the national movement of the late 19th century. The Lithuanian playwrights' pen was guided by the ideology of nationalism: they were creating a narrative of the resilience of an honourable nation, reflecting the reality of the audience's time. It contained an idealized image of Lithuanians, a whole gallery of noble heroes ready to meet their death for the sake of the nation. As Trinkūnaitė says, Lithuanian historical plays were characterized by a rather monochrome, uncomplicated storyline, depriving it of the possibility of a dramatic conflict: Lithuanian playwrights created a legend of the reckless heroism of its people, emphasizing the idea that it is pleasant, easy and honourable to die for one's homeland and its freedom (Trinkūnaitė 2007: 49). It is clear from the press reviews dedicated to the first productions of historical dramas that this legend of heroism

was relevant to audiences of the time, who saw in it the repressed participants of the national movement in their own lifetime.

A brief overview of Lithuanian Evenings and their repertoire demonstrates that the dramaturgy of that time was completely dependent on the stage. Having emerged primarily as an external dimension of the theatrical communication model (i.e. as a common cultured viewing of a simple realistic comedy), the Lithuanian Evenings' stage rapidly developed the dramatic repertoire necessary for the internal dimension of theatrical communication. In addition to simple plays and realistic comedies full of external comic elements, there was also a need for historical dramaturgy, to which Lithuanian playwrights of the time responded in abundance. It was then that the Lithuanian amateur theatre scene became able to appreciate Aspazija's historical drama *Vaidelote* and tried to master it.

The Lithuanian Reception of Aspazija's *Vaidelote* and its influence

In a letter to Eduards Volters, Aspazija stated that her only source for her drama *Vaidelote* was the book on German history by Otto von Rutenberg (1859–1860) which also covered the history of Lithuania quite extensively, and that she “obviously had to create a lot out of her own imagination” (Nastopka 1971: 77). In fact, the play treats the pagan Lithuanian past quite freely, and specific details, as Nastopka points out, are taken from the Latvian context (Latvian names of the characters, as well as verses imitating Latvian folk songs). The author needs the Lithuanian past as a backdrop against which the audience watches the psychological development of the protagonist Mirdza. The five-act drama takes the audience back to the pagan times of the 14th-century Lithuania when it was ruled by King Olģerds. Olģerds wants to give his daughter Mirdza, who was brought up from a young age in the temple of the fire goddess Praurima, in marriage to the warrior Laimons who has distinguished himself in the fight against the Crusaders. However, Laimons loves the temple's chief priestess Asja, who has been forcibly turned into a priestess. The news that Laimons has been given the honour of marrying the ruler's daughter complicates their secret love. When their relationship is revealed, the lovers are condemned to death, and Mirdza herself first wants to sacrifice the sinners to the goddess. For this reason, she becomes a priestess. However, instead of sacrificing them, she commits suicide herself, thus appeasing the old gods and prioritizing the personal happiness of her beloved man Laimons, and the one he has chosen – Asja.

Interestingly, the earliest Lithuanian press review of Aspazija's drama performed in Riga in 1894 views the production among other aspects of the Latvian national

movement: the author first mentions an archaeological convention which is planned for Riga in 1896, praises Latvians for actively researching their own past, and compares their work to that of the inoperative Lithuanians. He then recounts the plot of *Vaidelote*, staged in the Riga Latvian theatre, and concludes as follows:

There was a large audience, and among them were our Lithuanians, none of whom knew that there were kings in Lithuania – kings, dukes, and other powerful men, so we must all say a hundred thanks to the authoress of the drama, Aspazija, and to all of our brothers Latvians, for at least taking the trouble to show it to our ignorant friends. When, oh when will the Lithuanians do it themselves? (Kiszkiš iz Kopustų 1894: 104)

The issue of the Lithuanian past is again raised when other Latvian productions of *Vaidelote* are mentioned in the press. When the Latvian production in Riga is covered in 1903, it is naively suggested that the Latvian audience had turned up in such large numbers to see the play only because they were curious about the Lithuanian past (Sodietis 1903: 39). A year later in 1904, in a brief discussion of the performance the author says: "As I watched and listened to *Vaidelote*, images began to rush into my mind, one after the other, of our antiquity. How beautiful it is, how much it contains excellent content for dramatic writing!" (Žaibas 1904: 3). Thus, we can say that Lithuanian audiences appreciated this drama following their expectations of the repertoire of the Lithuanian stage at that time – as an opportunity to present the heroic Lithuanian past in an idealized way, as it was done in Lithuanian historical dramas being written at that time.

Almost 15 years passed from the first mention of Aspazija's *Vaidelote* in the Lithuanian press to translating it, and the manuscript translation that has reached us today was made in 1908 by the Riga amateur theatre lover Povilas Žaldokas. All we know about the translator is that he was the chairman of the first Lithuanian Benefit Society in Riga, founded in 1894, and was actively involved in theatre activities ([Anon.] 1920: 224). His pen is also responsible for the Lithuanian translation of Dāvids Švenčis's comedy *Smalki ļaudis* (Fine People) 1894, translated in 1907). The latter translation met a better fate, as it was published as a separate book in 1920 under the title *Intelligentai, arba parinktieji žmonės* (The Intelligentsia, or the Chosen People). However, the surviving manuscript of the translation of *Vaidelote* testifies about Žaldokas as a translator. It shows that his talent was far inferior to Aspazija's, since the original poetic drama was translated into prose. This is not surprising, as the Lithuanian language was still getting adjusted to more flexible artistic forms (the first tragedy written in verse was *The Duke of Pilėnai* by the aforementioned Šikšnys-Šiaulėniškis). The process of developing the standard Lithuanian language is vividly illustrated by the varying translations of the Latvian word *vaidelote* (pagan priestess). Today's standard Lithuanian word for it is *vaidilutė*; Žaldokas uses

vaidilaitē, but in the press of the time we also see variants such as *vaidelotē* (which remained the closest to the Latvian original), *vaideliotē*, and *vaidelytē*. However, the translator was hampered not only by the undeveloped standard Lithuanian language but also by the level of his own writing culture. The Lithuanian language in the translation remained very close to original, often adopting the syntactic structure of Latvian and translating literally. It is also noteworthy that Žaldokas was obviously undecided on how to denote Olģerds: his titles vary from king to duke, and Mirdza is also called either a lady or a princess. Apparently when translating, Žaldokas brought the theatrical work closer to Lithuanian history – and, by simplifying the text, also closer to the possibilities of the amateur stage of Riga *Kanklēs* society.

It seems that the simplified translation of Aspazija's drama turned into a simplified amateur production. In a critical review of the 1911 production by the Riga Lithuanian amateur theatre, the reviewer points out that the "beauty of the work has been diminished" because neither the dances nor the songs were performed (to which the audience in Riga was already accustomed to from the Latvian productions), and that the performance was also impaired by the poorly distributed roles, especially the priestesses who resembled female bears (Jonas 1911: 4). The review of the production of *Vaidelote* in Jelgava in 1913 (also staged by Riga theatre amateurs) is even shorter. Despite the praise for the evening, not a word is said about the play itself, only criticism about the local Lithuanians who had lost their moderation:

Mintauja⁵. The Lithuanian evening held here was a great success, with the participation of Riga's *Kankliai* artists who performed *Vaidilaitē*. There were a lot of people. Only the ending was bad-looking, and the reason for that was intoxicants. It would be very desirable for the Lithuanians of Mintauja to have a "sobriety" section. ([Anon.] 1913: 797)

In this publication, the most important thing is the sociocultural event that surrounded the performance – both its success (a lot of people came) and its failure (the "bad-looking" ending due to the overconsumption of alcohol). No further Lithuanian productions of Aspazija's *Vaidelote* could be found, and the mention in the press that the drama had been staged in Vilnius, Šiauliai, and other major Lithuanian cities ([Anon.] 1913a: 10) does not correspond to reality. We can guess that the play did not become popular on the Lithuanian stage because its staging (with dances, songs and mass scenes) was more complex than Lithuanian theatre lovers were used to. This would not have been the only example of such an issue on the Lithuanian stage at that time. The same happened to the historical drama *Kova ties Žalgiriais*

5 *Mintauja* is the Lithuanian name for Jelgava, cognate with its German name *Mitau*.

(The Battle beside Žalgiriai, 1906) by Lithuanian playwright Vincas Pietaris. This play, although it was included in the list of censored and government-authorized works, was never staged. Trinkūnaitė speculates that this was due to the impossibly complex set design and the theatrical limitations of the time. In Pietaris's drama, huge crowds of infantrymen and horsemen would gather on stage, and Vytautas the Great would ride in on horseback – something that the amateur Lithuanian theatre of the time did not have the means to show (Trinkūnaitė 2007: 57).

The popularity of Aspazija's *Vaidelote* on the Lithuanian stage is far inferior to that of other Latvian theatrical works – mostly realistic plays and comedies. The already mentioned comedy *Smalki ļaudis* by Dāvids Šveņķis, with the Lithuanian title *Intelligentai* (The Intelligentsia), was staged at least 5 times between 1908 and 1911 in the major Lithuanian cities and in Riga. Rūdolfs Blaumanis's *Zagli* (Thieves; first performed in 1890) enjoyed the same popularity and was staged at least 5 times between 1909 and 1914 under the Lithuanian title *Vagys* (Thieves), translated in 1907 by Juozas Pleirys. In 1913, Lithuanian theatre amateurs in Kaunas, Šiauliai and Saint Petersburg eagerly staged the play by Ādolfs Alunāns *Kas tie tādī, kas dziedāja* (Who Are Those Singing; 1888), translated as *Liūdna dainelė* (Little Sad Song) by Ona Pleirytė-Puidienė in 1909. It should also be noted that these theatrical works were often not so much translated as adapted for the Lithuanian stage. For example, Juozas Pleirys transformed Blaumanis's realistic two-act comedy into a four-act play, and his translation was published in 1909 as Pleirys's original artwork, with no reference to the Latvian author. Although Pleirys was criticized for plagiarism (L-nis 1912: 4), his style of adaptation was a relatively common practice of the time. This once again confirms the mutual dependence of dramaturgy and the stage – the most popular Latvian works were those pertaining to the genre that the Lithuanian audience was already accustomed to, and those which were easier to set and play on the amateur stage.

So, what were the possibilities for Aspazija's *Vaidelote* to influence the horizon of expectation of Lithuanian theatre lovers? Aspazija's name was essential to Lithuanian intellectuals of the time, as evidenced not only by the very positive assessment of her in the discussion about Latvian literature (Volters, Pleirytė-Puidienė 1908: 360), the translations of her poetry in the press (Kvašytė 2016: 285–286), and the invitation to readers to commemorate her jubilee ([Anon] 1913a: 10), but also by the influence she had on the contemporary Lithuanian dramatists. It is telling that Pleirytė-Puidienė, a Lithuanian writer and active participant in the Lithuanian Evenings, chose the pseudonym *Vaidilutė* after seeing a production of Aspazija's play in her hometown of Jelgava (Kubilius 2003: 31). Perhaps the influence of Aspazija's creative work could also explain the title of Kazys Puida's 1907 drama

Mirga (published in 1912) and his choice to make a young woman the protagonist of the plot. On the other hand, this was a general trend. As Aušra Martišiūtė points out, historical dramas written in the second decade of the 20th century often depict the fate of a priestess who has pledged herself to the gods. Whether a nobleman's daughter or a simple maid, the young woman becomes the main character, consciously sacrificing her life for the sake of her homeland. The researcher associates the origins of the theme with Adam Mickiewicz's Romanticist works *Żywila* and *Grażyna*, which glorified the national consciousness of women in defence of values important to the nation (Martišiūtė 2006: 126). Indeed, historical dramas with a female protagonist whose fate is somehow connected to the fate of the nation abound in the Lithuanian drama of the time. In the aforementioned Puida's drama *Mirga*, Duke Vytautas is rescued from prison by a maid called Mirga who swaps clothes with him, and a similar plot is recreated in Sofija Kymantaitė-Čiurlionienė's *Kalinys* (The Prisoner, 1911), as well as in many other plays of the same theme.

Could Aspazija's drama have pushed Lithuanian playwrights to take up, alongside the stories glorifying castle defenders' collective self-sacrifice, writing dramas that put a self-sacrificing priestess at the centre? Although the answer to this question is ambiguous, it should be assumed that the influence of Latvian drama was limited here as well, since this character was first created in the original Lithuanian drama in the second half of the 19th century already. Indeed, Aleksandras Fromas-Gužutis's drama *Vaidilutė, arba Žemaičių krikštas* (The Priestess, or the Christening of Samogitians) started a new plot pattern in Lithuanian historical dramaturgy – with a young girl at the centre of the story, just like in the drama by Aspazija. Fromas-Gužutis's work has a double plotline: the story of the baptism of Samogitia and the love affair between the pagan girl Rūtelė and the Christian man Jonas Doliva. The protagonist Rūtelė has been caught between two forces in history: the old pagan faith which its high priests want to preserve, and the Christianity spread by King Jogaila and Duke Vytautas. Which path should Rūtelė, who wants to marry the Christian Jonas Doliva, choose? The playwright does not offer any inner psychologism to resolve this question: the female character expresses her feelings in declamatory monologues and makes her decision quickly, without any hesitation. We have to agree with Martišiūtė, who argues that the most important character here is a collective one – the Samogitians who choose a new religion (Martišiūtė 2006: 125). This collectivity, appearing as the joint action of a group of characters or an individual's decision for the sake of the community, is also evident in other dramas with the plot of a self-sacrificing young woman. It is also significant that all the virgins in these dramas share the motives formulated by the protagonist in Puida's drama *Mirga*:

MIRGA. Oh, yes... yes – I will die, because I would rather die than live... What is my life worth against the future of the whole nation? – a shadow that no one will notice... – After all, everybody piles the most precious sacrifices on the altar of the homeland, so why can't I, a simple Lithuanian girl, give my most precious treasures to the homeland: my future happiness and life? (Puida 1912: 66)

In other words, a young woman voluntarily gives up her life herself for the sake of the community – i.e. for the same values for which the defenders of the castle killed themselves in the already established plot pattern of historical drama. Another drama that exalts the native culture is Pleirytė-Puidienė's *Skirmunda*⁶. The drama depicts the war between the Lithuanians and the Teutonic Knights in the 15th century. The protagonist Skirmunda, the daughter of the Duke of Eiriogala, becomes a priestess in order to escape from her wedding to the unloved Boleslovas. However, she is kidnapped by the Crusaders and held in their castle; there she is raped by the German Count Braunschweig and has a child. Her father comes to rescue her from captivity, but when he sees "this little dog", the Crusader's child, he throws him out of the window. After years of captivity waiting for her father, Skirmunda encounters in him a terrible judge. She protests his inhumanity by burning herself at the stake, and here again, in her last monologue, the exaltation of Lithuanian culture rings out in the highest tones: Skirmunda claims that her shame can only be lifted by Gabija, the Lithuanian goddess of fire. According to the logic of the drama, it is better to commit an honourable suicide than to bring up an enemy's child in dishonour.

Thus, the conscious sacrifices of the aforementioned protagonists coincide with Aspazija's female character's choice of suicide, but this is where the similarity ends. Undoubtedly, there was an aesthetic distance between the horizon of the Lithuanian audience's expectation and Aspazija's treatment of the plot of *Vaidelote*. This play does not glorify the heroic sacrifice of the ancient Lithuanians, as the audience of Lithuanian productions of historical drama was used to. In *Vaidelote* the conflict is not between collective pagan and Christian characters, but rather between the two contrasting female characters, Asja and Mirdza, and the psychological development of the latter is demonstrated.

Aspazija's historical drama *Vaidelote* was viewed according to the concept of early Lithuanian historical drama, which was also related to the limitations of

6 There is a confusion about the authorship of this drama. The uncertainty arose because there were two dramas with the same title. The first was written by Jēkabs Dravnieks and translated from Latvian by Juozas Pleirys as early as 1906 (Nastopka 1971: 203–204). This translation was mentioned in the press a couple of times by the translator's sister Ona Pleirytė-Puidienė (Pleirytė-Puidienė 1908: 2; Pl. 1906: 1). Unfortunately, the Lithuanian translation has not survived. Pleirytė-Puidienė on her part wrote a historical drama with the same title in 1912, based on her translation of the Russian writer's Gavriil Khrushchev-Sokolnikov's novel *Grjunval'dskij boj, ili Slavjane i nemcy* (The Battle of Grunwald, or Slavs and Germans; 1889, Lithuanian publication in 1922).

amateur theatre at that time. Thus, as the reviews published in the press make clear, the audience of this drama was not interested in the development of the inner dramatism, but in the background against which it developed – the heroic, majestic Lithuanian past. In other words, Aspazija's *Vaidelote* may have seemed too modern to the Lithuanian audience both in its theatrical language, which required a more professional performance than Lithuanian theatre artists of the time were capable of, and in its Neo-romanticist nature which put the main focus on the character's inner dramatism. This inner dramatism, which makes up the core of Aspazija's play, would later come to Lithuanian dramaturgy with works that no longer had direct links with the Lithuanian theatre scene of the time, and that were intended to be read rather than acted. These were the creative works of Vincas Krėvė-Mickevičius, Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas or Liudas Gira, which were moving into a new stage of drama – Neo-romanticism.

Conclusions

Although Lithuanian theatre amateurs perceived Aspazija's historical drama *Vaidelote* as topically relevant, and encouraged its translation and staging, the play never became popular. Plans to translate and stage this work emerged as early as the end of the 19th century. However, the first and only translation of the play was completed in 1908 by Povilas Žaldokas. Thanks to the efforts of Riga theatre enthusiasts, *Vaidelote* was performed a few times in Riga (1911, 1913) and in Jelgava (1913). The drama's complicated path to the Lithuanian stage, as well as the scarcity of its productions by Lithuanian theatre amateurs in Latvian cities, can be explained by the state of Lithuanian theatre at that time. It was still in its amateur period, lagging behind the development of Latvian theatre by a couple of decades. The Lithuanian Evenings movement, which emerged at the end of the 19th century, began by establishing external theatrical communication. It introduced its audience to theatre as a cultural and useful collective activity and then formalized the internal theatrical experience on the basis of those forms of theatricality that were understandable to the audience of that time. This is reflected in the Lithuanian Evenings' repertoire, which primarily offered short, simple plays and comedies. Thus, when it came to the Lithuanian stage, Aspazija's drama was also simplified — it was translated into prose without reproducing all the stylistic registers of the author's language.

Nevertheless, the name and works of Aspazija were important to Lithuanian writers of the time. This is evident in Pleirytė-Puidienė's pseudonym Vaidilutė, as well as in the similar historical themes of original Lithuanian plays. However, Lithuanian playwrights had to adapt their work to the amateur theatre stage, so

they presented the plot of a young woman committing suicide in a way that met the expectations of the Lithuanian audience. The Lithuanian public was not interested in internal conflict set against the backdrop of history, but rather in this decorative scenery itself – the noble, romanticized Lithuanian past, as in the early stages of Lithuanian historical drama this backdrop was supposed to create the legend of an ever-living, majestic state. While Aspazija exalted individual freedom and discussed personal dignity, Lithuanian historical dramas did not problematize the conscious sacrifice of the individual through internal conflict; rather, it was completely subordinated to the logic of collective sacrifice. Similarly, the artistic quality at the Lithuanian Evenings was sacrificed to draw an audience, and Aspazija's *Vaidelote* was too complex for the Lithuanian public at that time. However, when it was finally ready for the individual conflicts presented on stage, which were disconnected from the concerns of the national community, Lithuanian authors could offer original works analyzing this theme. This is why Aspazija's work had limited influence on Lithuanian drama at the time. Nevertheless, her play functioned as a source of inspiration for Lithuanian playwrights, providing a direction for the further development that ultimately led to the transition of Lithuanian dramaturgy into the Neo-romanticist paradigm.

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