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**Lithuanian Drama in the Brezhnev Era:
The Two Cases of the Theater of the Absurd**

**Lietuviešu drāma Brežņeva laikmetā:
divi absurda teātra piemēri**

Summary   This article focuses on the context and time when the first two plays of the Theater of the Absurd were staged in Lithuania. The aim of the article is to answer the following questions: what dramatic experiences existed in the Soviet era, in what ways playwrights were trying to communicate with the reader/viewer, what message was formulated and conveyed in the plays, and how the expression of drama has changed since the Soviet era. By focusing on two cases of the Theater of the Absurd – Kazys Saja's *Mamutų medžioklė* (The Mammoth Hunt) and Arvydas Ambrasas and Regimantas Midvikis's *Duobė* (The Pit) –, this article examines the period in question and the collective consciousness of the playwrights' contemporaries as seen and revealed in the plays and performances.

Kopsavilkums   Šī raksta uzmanības centrā ir konteksts un laikmets, kurā radās divi pirmie absurda teātra lugu iestudējumi Lietuvā. Raksta mērķis ir rast atbildes uz šādiem jautājumiem: kāda bija drāmas tradīcija padomju laikā, kā dramaturgi centās uzrunāt lasītājus/skatītājus, kāds vēstījums tika noformulēts un ietverts lugās, un kā dramatiskā izteiksme kopš padomju laikiem ir mainījusies. Pievēršoties diviem absurda teātra piemēriem – Kaža Sajas lugai *Mamutų medžioklė* (Mamutu medības) un Arvida Ambrasa un Regimanta Midviķa lugai *Duobė* (Bedre) –, šis raksts pēta attiecīgo laikmetu un minēto dramaturgu laikabiedru kolektīvo apziņu, kādu viņi to redzēja un kā tā attēlota šajās lugās un izrādēs.

The article examines the shift in Lithuanian drama from romantic and poetic historical dramas depicting the events of the past to the reflection of the Soviet present in plays created using the poetics of the Theater of the Absurd. In quantitative terms, the Theater of the Absurd constituted a very small part of the theatrical performances of the period under study. However, its impact on the audience, as recorded in eyewitness accounts and documented in many written memoirs, has been especially strong. In this respect, the focus on dramas of new forms and issues is logical. Moreover, the outbreak of the Theater of the Absurd in Lithuania in the form of translations, original works, and stage productions during the Soviet era has been little researched in Lithuania and is almost completely unknown outside the country.

The first part of the article provides an overview of the context, and explains the meanings that the playwrights who wrote historical dramas were trying to reveal to the reader-viewer. It is also described how modern drama was beginning to penetrate Lithuanian culture of the Soviet era, what kind of dialogue was conducted between playwrights in Lithuania and those in the diaspora, and what modern explorations of Western drama were reaching the Lithuanian playwrights and theater people behind the Iron Curtain.

The second part of the article, based on memoirs and examples of texts, explains how the news about the Theater of the Absurd reached Soviet Lithuania and in which plays and theaters the shift to the new way of representing reality by means of modern poetics took place. The third and fourth parts of the article analyze two plays of 1968, showing how Soviet Lithuanian playwrights, Saja in *Mamutų medžioklė* (The Mammoth Hunt) and Ambrasas and Midvikis in *Duobė* (The Pit), transformed the poetics of the Theater of the Absurd to reveal the reality of their time and to avoid the prohibitions of censorship. The plays are analyzed in terms of the location of the action and the identity of the characters.

The fifth part uses memoirs to explore how the message of each play was understood by the audience. The sixth part of the article, based on the analysis of documentary material, explains how the period of the Theater of Absurd in Lithuanian drama was brought to an end, how censorship manifested, and what led to the suppression of this breakthrough in the search for a new drama and theatrical language.

Historical context: from allusions
to tragic events of the present
in historical dramas to critical diagnosis
of society in the Theater of the Absurd

As in the rest of the Soviet Union, in Lithuania a more favorable time for drama arrived after the second All-Union Soviet Writers' Congress, held in 1954. Articles dealing with theoretical issues of drama began to appear in the press (by Juozas Grušas, Jonas Lankutis, Algis Samulionis, etc.). After being subjected to the directives of the "theory of *bezkonfliktnost* (conflictlessness)", now the playwrights were able to explore various conflicts, albeit under the constraints of censorship. Following the Khrushchev's Thaw, Lithuanian theater and drama found a new direction – productions of historical-poetic dramas, which suited and attracted different theater personalities. The season of 1956-1957 became an important turning point in Lithuanian theater. In 1956 at the Vilnius Academic Drama Theater, Romualdas Juknevičius (1906–1963) staged Balys Sruoga's *Apyaušrio dalia* (Fate Before Dawn), which depicted the peasants' uprising against serfdom and the tragic life story of a ballerina descended from serfs. A year later (in 1957) at Kaunas Drama Theater, Henrikas Vancevičius (1924–2014) directed Juozas Grušas's *Herkus Mantas*, which portrayed the Prussian uprising against the Teutonic Knights and the complex conflicts of the uprising leader, Herkus Mantas, with outsiders and his own people.

From then on, for almost three decades historical drama became the most significant dramatic form artistically and socially, performing a defensive function. It still receives the most attention from drama and theater researchers (Jonas Lankutis[1], Reda Pabarčienė (2010: 170–192), Gražina Mareckaitė (2004) and others). Benedikts Kalnačs has noted that when comparing Lithuanian drama with Latvian and Estonian drama, historical drama – in particular the desire to continue the tradition of interwar Lithuanian theater – is a distinctive feature:

> Lithuanian playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s most often turned to the motifs of the past, and the dramatic works of Juozas Grušas and Justinas Marcinkevičius have a strong connection to the dramatic works of independent Lithuania (Kalnačs 2011: 178).

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1   Jonas Lankutis's books include *Lietuvių dramaturgijos raida* (The Development of Lithuanian Drama, 1974, supplemented edition in 1979), *Lietuvių tarybinė dramaturgija* (Lithuanian Soviet Drama, 1983), *Justino Marcinkevičiaus draminė trilogija* (Drama Trilogy by Justinas Marcinkevičius, 1977), *Etiudai apie Juozą Grušą* (Etudes about Juozas Grušas, 1981), and *Lietuvių dramaturgijos tyrinėjimai* (Studies of Lithuanian Drama, 1988). The latter work consists of revised, corrected and supplemented monographs *The Development of Lithuanian Drama* and *Lithuanian Soviet Drama*. After the restoration of independence, Lithuanian readers were introduced to the works of playwrights in exile in the book *Lietuvių egzodo dramaturgija 1940–1990* (Drama of the Lithuanian Exodus: 1940–1990, 1995). However, Lankutis did not attempt to link the works of playwrights who worked in Lithuania and in the United States into a single trajectory of drama development.

Modern quests of playwrights and theater directors have received much less attention. However, the younger researchers of theater and literature have started researching modern Lithuanian drama in various aspects – see, for instance, Andrius Jevsejevas's article *Absurdo poetika Vidurio ir Rytų Europos dramaturgijoje* (Poetics of the Absurd in Central and Eastern European Drama, 2009); Rimantas Kmita's publications *1965–1972: pakilimas* (The Years of 1965–1972: The Rise) and *1973–1980: pilkieji metai* (1973–1980: Gray Years) as part of the MO Museum project *The History of Culture* (from 2011); and a couple of doctoral theses: Goda Dapšytė's *The Impact of the Soviet Censorship on the Development of Lithuanian Theater Discourse* (2015), Ginta Čingaitė's *Communication Strategies in Kazys Saja's Plays: The Aspect of Genre* (2015), and others.

While Lithuania was still suffering from Stalinist repressions and censorship, writers Antanas Škėma, Kostas Ostrauskas, and Algirdas Landsbergis who had fled to the West and settled in the USA began to create their own works of modern drama, focusing on the artistic tendencies of the time. In 1954, Saja made his debut in the Lithuanian theater with a traditional comedy *Lažybos* (Betting). At the same time, Ostrauskas published his play *Pypkė* (The Pipe) in the USA – an example of the Theater of the Absurd (cf. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, published in 1952 and staged in Paris in 1953, which later became a classic of the Theater of the Absurd).

In the plays written in Lithuania and in the USA, one can see parallels between the issues raised in the text and in the subtext as early as the mid1950s, although in terms of dramatic expression the divide was so pronounced that the plays could hardly be compared. In 1956, Škėma published his drama *Pabudimas* (The Awakening) written during 1949–1950 in the USA, and in 1957 Grušas's *Herkus Mantas* appeared in Lithuania[2] – "the first tragedy of the post-Stalin Thaw which, by the very fact of its appearance, refuted "the theory of *bezkonfliktnost*" that had been stiffening the post-war theater" (Pabarčienė 2010: 126). Lankutis notes that in Lithuania at that time *Herkus Mantas*[3] "paved the way for historiosophical generalizations of national experience, later [a decade later – AML] heightened by Justinas Marcinkevičius" (Lankutis 1988: 452).

The works "resemble" one another through the theme of resistance. The drama of the encounter with the repressive NKVD system during the first year of Soviet occupation in the 1940s revealed in Škėma's play has a universal subtext. Rimvydas Šilbajoris observes that the characters of *The Awakening* find themselves in a critical situation not only as human beings but also as Humanity, standing "before the black

2 In 1957, Grušas was awarded the LSSR State Prize for the tragedy *Herkus Mantas.*

3 Grušas received the LSSR State Prize twice for his historical dramas *Herkus Mantas* (1957), *Švitrigaila* (1957) and *Barbora Radvilaitė* (1976).

face of Nothingness"; "they become like actors playing the roles of enemies in some human tragicomedy directed by Fate" (Šilbajoris 1992: 265, 266).

Grušas's *Herkus Mantas* is a work with a double meaning. The Prussian uprising depicted in the play triggers associations with the resistance that had just been suppressed in Lithuania three years earlier (General Jonas Žemaitis-Vytautas, the Lithuanian partisan commander and de facto 4th President of the Republic of Lithuania, was shot in Moscow's Butyrka prison on November 26, 1954). Dovilė Zelčiūtė confirmed that people understood that the tragedy written by Grušas depicted not only the Prussian uprising and its leader Herkus Mantas. She noted that the stories about this play that she had heard from her parents who were actors "imprinted on my consciousness as something dangerous, unauthorized, and turbulent that had united all those present on the stage (and, I now realize, also those in the audience)" (Zelčiūtė 2020: 4). In the play and in a film of the same title based on a screenplay by Saulius Šaltenis, directed by Marijonas Giedrys and produced by Lithuanian Film Studio in 1972, theater and cinema audience was able to "read between the lines about the tragic fate of small nations, so relevant to Lithuania" (Macaitis 2021).

Sruoga's historical drama *Fate Before Dawn*, written in 1941 and depicting the tragic outcome of the 1769 peasant uprising, also evoked such associations. Vytautas Kubilius points out that unlike Škėma's *The Awakening*, which dealt with universal issues in the recent history, the playwrights living in Lithuania established "a silent dialogue" when through the ancient heroes, their exploits and their tragic fates, readers of historical drama and viewers of historical plays learnt to recognize the connections between the history of Lithuania and the tragic realities of their own time and the recent past, i.e. the strong-willed guerrilla resistance that was suppressed by the Soviet Union (Kubilius 1998: 7).

Only a couple of performances based on modern drama were staged in 1940–1956 (Vengris et al. 1987), whereas the period of 1957–1970 stood out for the performances based on foreign and Lithuanian works of modern drama in all Lithuanian theaters. Theater directors Juozas Miltinis (1907–1994) and Vytautas Čibiras (1936–2009) introduced plays by foreign playwrights (Luigi Pirandello, Arthur Miller, Wolfgang Borchert, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, and others) and Lithuanian authors (Kazys Saja, Juozas Grušas, and others). During the season of 1966–1967, performances directed by Miltinis based on Grušas's *Adomo Brunzos paslaptis* (The Secret of Adomas Brunza, 1966) and *Pražūtingas apsvaigimas* (Fatal Intoxication, 1967), in which the playwright revealed the complex inner conflicts of contemporary people, and Jonas Jurašas's productions of Slawomir Mrożek's *Tango* and Leonid Zorin's *A Warsaw Melody* in 1967, as well as dramas of the Eastern Theater of the Absurd that strongly condemned the totalitarian policies of the Soviet Union which restricted all freedom of expression, became a turning point for many theatergoers.

Miltinis, who worked at Panevėžys Theater, fully incorporated Lithuanian plays into his "laboratory of modern consciousness" (Trinkūnaitė 2021). Its main instrument was "an extraordinary quality of acting – a way of life on stage that demonstrates exceptional truthfulness, naturalness, simplicity and, at the same time, an almost impossible inner tension and meticulous precision" (Trinkūnaitė 2021). Jurašas's performances signaled a transition to a new theater language, rejection of the traditional realistic rendition of a play and creation of a conditional theater of metaphors. The young generation of theater directors (Dalia Tamulevičūtė (1940-2006), Jonas Vaitkus (b. 1944), Eimuntas Nekrošius (1952–2018), and Gytis Padegimas (b. 1952)) who made their debut during the 1972–1980 also developed the metaphorical theater.

The breakthrough of the Theater of the Absurd poetics in Lithuania: the creative conditions and creative forces

The playwrights and theaters of the Eastern Bloc countries, namely Czechoslovakia (the Czech author Vaclav Havel and the Slovak author Viliam Klimáček) and Poland (Slawomir Mrożek), which enjoyed slightly more freedom than those in the republics of the Soviet Union, were the first to reveal a critical attitude towards the existence of the Soviet person and the inherent political nature of the Eastern absurd by using the poetics of the Theater of the Absurd.

The Theater of the Absurd reached Lithuania through Polish magazines. Writer Saja made a special trip to Poland to see the performances: "We saw very interesting things that were taking place in Poland, and we were tempted to create something like this for Lithuanian theaters."[4] He also had the opportunity to see American theater productions and to talk to Lithuanian diaspora writers: "In Khrushchev's time, you could even go to America if you were invited by some close relative: your father, mother, brother, sister [..]. After nine years of petitioning, in 1967 I received permission to visit my brother" (Saja 2019: 321).

Ramunė Reimerienė, sister of theater director Ambrasas, recalled: "The turning point in society was maybe 1966. The news about the hippie movement reached us; we could already listen to rock music and vinyl records, get a glimpse of contemporary art in magazines, have long hair and wear jeans. At that time, avant-garde was very

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4   Lithuanian National Broadcaster's radio program *Pirmas sakinys* (The First Sentence). *Teatro mamutas Kazys Saja* (Kazys Saja, The Theater Mammoth), November 25, 2021; hosted by Mindaugas Nastaravičius and Tomas Vaiseta. https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/2000187829/pirmas-sakinys-teatro-mamutas-kazys-saja

rare in Lithuania; if anything happened it happened only in underground" (Reimerienė 2009: 283).[5] The State Art Institute of Lithuania was famous for being liberal, and it was in this place that the Theater of the Absurd, hardly imaginable on the stage of state-funded theater, first appeared.

Poet Tomas Venclova notes that "a new generation had emerged, not quite like the old Lithuanian intellectuals, but not at all like the Sovietizers and the *stribai* [derived from Russian *istrebiteli*] [..]. The ideological overseers did not weed the seedlings as diligently, and thus the soil was no longer so infertile [..]. [In 1967] the young writers, such as Marcelijus Martinaitis or Juozas Aputis who were not inclined to follow worn-out patterns in literature, published their first books; Vincas Kisarauskas, Petras Repšys, and the 'silent modernists', who by the way were not so silent at times, started participating in exhibitions" (Venclova 2009: 239).[6]

In the 1970s, modern drama began to appear in Lithuania. Translations of plays were published by newly established cultural magazines, and a few performances based on modern plays by Western playwrights were staged. From 1969 onwards, the first translations of the Theater of the Absurd into Lithuanian appeared. However, theater productions, with the few exceptions discussed in this article, took more than two decades – until the Reform Movement of Lithuania in 1988 and the restoration of independence in 1990 – to materialize. Samuel Beckett's *La Dernière bande* (Krapp's Last Tape, 1958) was translated into Lithuanian in 1969 (Beckett 1969: 26–29) and staged in Lithuania only in 1988. The first translation of the Theater of the Absurd appeared in *Nemunas*, a monthly magazine for young people, founded in 1967 by the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Leninist Communist Youth Union and the Lithuanian SSR Writers' Union. The translator Dovydas Judelevičius briefly introduced the context and poetics of the Theater of the Absurd. Even though he failed to mention Martin Esslin's *The Theater of the Absurd* (1961), he listed the main authors of the genre: Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, and Jean Genet; introduced the concepts of antitheater and anti-drama.

A year later in 1970, a Lithuanian translation of Beckett's solo pantomime *Act Without Words* (Beckett 1970: 50–52) was published in the monthly magazine *Kultūros barai*, founded in 1965 by the Ministry of Culture of the LSSR. The issue dedicated to the centenary of Vladimir Lenin contained a play of the Theater of the Absurd, translations of Arthur Rimbaud's poetry, and a conversation about a new

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5   Reminiscences of Ramunė Reimerienė, sister of Arvydas Ambrasas, recorded in 2006.

6   Reminiscences of Tomas Venclova, recorded in 2008.

theatrical phenomenon – poetry miniatures, or one-person theater. The introductory article by Judelevičius pointed out that the Theater of the Absurd "shocked the audience" a dozen years ago and has now become "more or less classic", and that Beckett won the Nobel Prize in 1969 (Beckett 1970: 50). In the same year, the book *XX amžiaus dramaturgija* (20th Century Drama), compiled by Judelevičius, was published (Judelevičius 1970). It included Beckett's play *Happy Days* (1961, staged in Lithuania in 1993), Eugène Ionesco's *La Leçon* (The Lesson) (staged in 1951 and published in 1954; a chamber opera based on the play by Vytautas Bartulis was produced in 1993 in Lithuania), and Max Frisch's *Biografie. Ein Spiel* (Biographie: A Game, 1967). Readers could also get acquainted with the work of the Angry Young Men generation – John Osborne's play *Inadmissible Evidence* (staged in 1964 and published in 1965). Osborne's most famous play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) was one of the first modern drama works in Lithuanian theater staged in 1967 (directed by Vytautas Čibiras) in the new Lithuanian SSR State Youth Theater, established in 1965. Readers were also introduced to Harold Pinter's play *The Caretaker* (1960). The plays by Osborn and Pinter were translated by Tomas Venclova, who in 1975 expressed his anti-communist views in an open letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania asking for permission to emigrate to the West; he left the country in 1977.

In the spring of 1968, *Duobė* (The Pit) was performed at the Corridor Theater by the students of the State Art Institute of Lithuania (written by Ambrasas and Midvikis, directed by Ambrasas). In the play, some characters live in a pit while others live above it – they are gravediggers who are constantly at work, digging and filling up the pits. Once the characters get into the pit, they cannot or do not want to get out. A stranger climbs out straight away. In the pit, the characters buy train tickets to the White City by phone, but they never leave. The gravediggers who work above the ground, fill up the pits and immediately dig new ones:

> FIRST GRAVEDIGGER: [..] Aren't we digging the pits ourselves?
> SECOND GRAVEDIGGER: [..] Who cares! Fill it up and be over with it!
> FIRST GRAVEDIGGER: But still, look, we're shoveling the other one!
> SECOND GRAVEDIGGER: No matter, let's fill up that last one, there will be no more of them.

The play depicts gravediggers in whose consciousness a reasonable picture of reality enters (we are not only filling pits, but at the same time digging new ones which we will have to fill again by shoveling new pits). However, even the "awakened" character does not try to change anything; on the contrary, he succumbs to the influence of an indifferent, mechanically task-oriented character, and continues the same existence. The shoveling and filling up of the pits repeats monotonously during the play.

At the end of the same year, the premiere of Saja's (b. 1932) play *Mamutų medžioklė* (The Mammoth Hunt) directed by Jurašas (b. 1936) took place in Kaunas Drama Theater. Modris Tenisons's (1945–2020) pantomime troupe, which had just been transferred to Kaunas Drama Theater, also performed in the play.

The playwright Juozas Glinskis says that his first play, *Pasivaikščiojimas mėnesienoje* (A Stroll in the Moonlight, or In the Moonlight), which in a grotesque way depicts the absurdity of the existence of a decrepit Soviet elite, was written in 1968–1969 during the Prague Spring. Glinskis remembered: "The Writers' Union was quite democratic and did not interfere with work. All you had to do was not to stick your head out too far, not to be too loud, to show respect for the more powerful, and you could write what you wanted, how you wanted, and as much as you wanted. Not for publishing, of course [..]. And that is how *A Stroll…* was born. In 1968–1969, while toiling away in the Pravieniškės Penitentiary. During the Prague Spring. Amid the rumbling of the Brezhnev cannonade" (Glinskis 2008). The play was secretly smuggled out of Lithuania and staged at the Theater for the New City in New York under the pseudonym of Anonymous only in 1978. The play was directed by Jurašas, who emigrated from Lithuania.

For the first time, the poetics in dramas written in Lithuania and the USA fully overlapped in the 1960s. The affinity of themes and images and the orientation towards the poetics of the Theater of the Absurd was obvious. In 1961, Škėma wrote *Ataraxia* and in 1964–1965, Ostrauskas published his *Duobkasiai* (The Gravediggers). *The Pit* by Ambrasas and Midvikis, created in Lithuania in 1968, relates to Ostrauskas's drama through William Shakespeare and the gravediggers in *Hamlet*. In 1969, Ostrauskas wrote the second part of the Theater of the Absurd trilogy, *Gyveno kartą senelis ir senelė* (Once Upon a Time There Was an Old Man and an Old Woman). The poetics of the Theater of the Absurd is the basis of Saja's triptych of one-act tragicomedies *Oratorius* (The Orator), *Maniakas* (The Maniac), and *Pranašas Jona* (Prophet Jonah) (all three staged in 1967 and published in 1966–1967), and the play *The Mammoth Hunt* (staged in 1968 and published in 1969).

Algirdas Landsbergis's drama *Penki stulpai turgaus aikštėje* (Five Posts in a Market Square, 1966) stands out among the works by American Lithuanian playwrights. He published his work on the theme of post-war resistance in the USA in 1966.[7] Translated into English, it was widely acclaimed in the American press and theater. In the same year in Soviet Lithuania, Saja also published an ambiguous drama about the post-war resistance, entitled *'Vežimo' kompanija (Baimė)* (The Carriage Company (Fear))

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7   The play was translated into English and other languages and was staged in a few American theaters. For more information see: Sruoginis (2022).

(Saja 1966). Saja's historical drama, which escaped the eyes of the censors, was written for the amateur theater. The playwright was also protected by the fact that theater critics made no notice of the play (Čingaitė 2015: 136-145).

In Soviet Lithuania, bold avant-garde experimental performances were created only in student theater. Arvydas Stasiulevičius's *Pjesė* (*10875 BK*) (A Play (10875 BK)) written in 1971, stood out among the performances staged by the Vilnius University's Underground Theater. The audience looks at four actors and into the darkness:

> Night. No sound. Deadly silence, etc.
> Before the performance, four actors put make-up on stage for 15 minutes. Later, the stage goes dark for 53 minutes. After the performance, four actors remove their make-up on stage for 15 minutes. (Stasiulevičius 1998: 7)

Recalling the experimental work *4:33* (four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence) created by the American composer John Cage in 1952, Stasiulevičius's play, written in the Soviet era, replaced Cage's pianist by four actors, the "sounding" silence in the light concert hall by silence in the dark, and extended the time of the performance to 53 minutes.

Texts written for student theater productions were published after the restoration of independence and thus escaped censorship. The plays by Stasiulevičius created for the Underground Theater were first published in 1998 in a literary newspaper *Literatūra ir menas* (Stasiulevičius 1998: 7) and the plays of Ambrasas and Midvikis performed at the Corridor Theater were first published in 2009 (Ambrasas 2009). The inclusion of the above-mentioned works in the cultural field has been determined by their publications. The plays staged at the Corridor Theater and published in the book have already been described and analyzed in many articles and have been functioning in the cultural studies of the Soviet era, whereas Stasiulevičius's dramatic experiments published in the weekly press have been left on the margins of dramaturgical research.

The Pit and *The Mammoth Hunt*: the spatial coordinates in the Theater of the Absurd

The Mammoth Hunt and *The Pit* are set in different locations. In *The Mammoth Hunt*, the characters travel through the streets of an ordinary city, only the characters they meet are somewhat unusual. However, the goal pursued – a festival, a carnival – seems to explain the strange appearance of the characters and the passers-by they meet, and prevents the characters from

critically evaluating their belief in the illusion of celebration. In *The Pit*, on the contrary, the action takes place in a strange anti-utopian space. As if after some disaster, people have gathered to live together in a place that resembles a grave or a trench. Nevertheless, they believe that there is a train station from which the trains run to the White City where beautiful houses are erected and people walk along nice streets.

Despite the different depictions of the setting, the playwrights employ the same principle: they juxtapose the setting of here and now with the characters' dream, with the fictional place that expresses their goal. In *The Mammoth Hunt*, it is a place where a festival is taking place and to which the characters dressed in carnival costumes travel. In *The Pit*, it is the White City where the characters have been in the past and where they dream to go by train in the near future.

The characters believe that their dream is very close to coming true. In *The Mammoth Hunt*, the characters think they hear the noise of a celebration and that very little is left to reach their goal. All they need is to meet someone who can tell them exactly where the party is happening. The characters in *The Pit* are convinced that there is a railway station above them, a belief reinforced by the ticket seller who shows up occasionally and the announcements of arriving and departing trains.

Only the intensity of the characters' pursuit of their goal differs. The characters in *The Mammoth Hunt* act relentlessly, they walk on and on and on, without thinking that their journey might be pointless. It is only when the usual city streets are replaced by a strange trap – all of them get stuck in tar and are unable to move – that the characters finally seem to realize their true situation: that they are stuck and are not free. They are no longer thinking about the festival, they are now concerned with how to free themselves. It seems that they should help each other to reach a new goal; however, Saja's straightforward portrayal of the characters caught in the swamp of Soviet life does not offer an optimistic ending. He does not show the characters acting in unison to liberate themselves together; on the contrary, when sensing the danger, they think only of themselves and remain "trapped" in the tar. Their journey is over.

The political subtext was obvious. The characters in the play long for a celebration that they do not get to anyway. Eventually they are stuck in the tar and are unable to move. Like the characters in *The Pit*, they could break free if they were conscientious and not, as the Guard notes, reminded him of mammoths:

> GUARD. Not so much a guard as a mammoth hunter. I hope you were introduced to my principle: Everything for a man and zilch for a mammoth? [..]
> GYPSY WOMAN. We aren't mammoths. We've found a way out.
> GUARD. Is that so?! So what are you waiting for? Prove it, get out! Make me happy. How much time do you need?
> GYPSY WOMAN. Leave us alone for another short hour. (Saja 1969: 65)

However, the characters cannot agree with each other; they do not have the will to act and regain freedom: "CHIMNEY SWEEPER. You won't convince everybody, and we need everybody. There will be no result." (Saja 1969: 66). Thus, everybody remains trapped in the tar, doomed to death and extinction. The play says that this is the picture of us; we naively search for a carnival but when trapped, we act not as people seeking freedom but as the long-extinct mammoths, unable to overcome the herd instinct. Using the setting of the play, Saja reveals the illusions of a human being incited by Soviet ideology and the meaninglessness of the Soviet people's existence. He offers to imagine the possibility of liberation, and warns about the dangers of the lack of unity within the community.

The characters in *The Pit* are much more passive. They talk, eat, read – that is, they live and spend their time, believing that they can leave the pit and go to the White City at any time. However, they do not climb out of the pit. It seems very difficult, even impossible to leave. Moreover, even after the Stranger gets in and out of the pit with ease, the four characters do not even try to break free.

In *The Pit*, the characters are intellectual; they quote *Hamlet*. The fragment of Hamlet's conversation with Horatio is inserted in Ophelius's observation: "They want to bury us alive", which is continued by Hamlet's quote: "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all" (Ambrasas 2009: 171; Shakespeare 1994: 302). Once the characters climb out of one pit, they immediately find themselves in another pit. As in many plays of the Theater of the Absurd, a never-ending repetition of the same situation is implied. It is expected that an "arrival of Godot" would solve all problems. As one Beckett's character notes: "We keep coming up with things to delude ourselves and convince us that we are still alive."

Like Saja's play, *The Pit* depicts a situation of danger. The characters realize that when the gravediggers come they will be buried alive. Upon realizing it, everyone quickly climbs out of the pit. It seems that they should finally start to act in order to achieve their goal, to reach the White City. However, the authors of *The Pit* do not provide an optimistic ending either. It turns out that there is no railway station, no trains, perhaps no White City. After realizing that they have been living in a world of illusions, the characters experience the disappointment of "there is nothing out there". However, the shocking feeling of emptiness does not change their normal way of existence. They notice another pit and, seemingly relieved that they have nowhere to go, they climb inside quickly to continue their meaningless existence.

The playwrights show that even after forgetting the festival or the White City – the belief in the bright future of communism – the characters no longer have the will to break free. Saja is more positive: he uses his play to convey the message to readers

and viewers that unity within community is crucial for liberation. The message conveyed by the play performed in the student theater is much more somber. They aim to shock the audience by exposing the deformity of Soviet man: the characters remain in the pit, content with their miserable and meaningless existence.

The issue of character identity: self-consciousness and the loss of the true self

In the final act of *The Mammoth Hunt* the characters, stuck in tar, encounter the Guard whom the critics call the playwright's alter ego: "The author introduces a kind of alter ego (the character of the Guard) into the play" (Jevsejevas 2009). The Guard tests the characters for their ability to liberate themselves. This naming of the character – "the one who protects" – is a clear reference to the value of freedom that the play affirms.

In *The Pit*, the Stranger becomes an example of liberation; however, he does not represent the value of freedom as strongly as Saja's Guard does. The Stranger, given the name of Ostap (an allusion to the protagonist of Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov's novel *Dvenadtsat stulyev* (The Twelve Chairs)), gets into the pit at the end of the play and is turned into a character who has come to terms with his circumstances. However, the play ends with his words that raise anxiety and the question of what the characters will do next: "THE STRANGER. He's not here! There's no one there! A bare field!!! A bare field! A field. A bare field [..]" (Ambrasas 2009: 173). The subtext in both plays hides hope that the characters can begin to live differently – more consciously and more freely.

In both plays, the characters are portrayed as playing certain roles. In *The Mammoth Hunt*, the people who have disguised themselves as a gypsy, a chimney sweeper, and a hunchbacked nun travel to a carnival. They are led by a blind organ grinder. In *The Pit*, the characters are named after characters in Shakespeare's plays. However, they are turned into the opposites of Shakespeare's characters: Caesar, the heroic personality of the Ancient Rome, is made into a clown; Ophelia from *Hamlet* is transformed into Ophelius the tragedian; the witty and cheerful Benedick from *Much Ado About Nothing* becomes an obscure character who does not speak and always eats. Kornelijus, the name of the protagonist of *The Pit*, is a reference to the French playwright Pierre Corneille. He often reads a book or rummages through his suitcase. The characters Caesar, Ophelius, and Benedick are present in all three of Ambrasas and Midvikis's plays: *The Pit*, *Marathon*, and *Monday Afternoon*. The gravediggers also come from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but they have lost their sharpness of thought and wit. The Stranger, called Ostap by the ticket seller, may be a reference to Ilf and Petrov's crafty crook Ostap Bender, as already mentioned.

In both plays, the playwrights provide fragmentary memories of what the characters did in the past – i.e. who they are, or rather who they really were. The characters in *The Mammoth Hunt* were engaged in everyday rural household chores, while the characters in *The Pit* were acting in a theater. The Stranger, who has fallen into the pit, boasts that he has played a gravedigger in *Hamlet*, and Ophelius takes over the dialogue from the tragedy that the Stranger begins to recite. However, we do not find out who the characters in the play really are. Their identity is not only "hidden" from us, the readers and the audience, but from other characters in the play as well. They do not reveal their true identity to one another either. The playwrights portray the characters as if they have conformed to their false self, to their role, having lost their identity.

Audience reaction: the impact
of recognizing the condition of the Soviet man
The Pit and *The Mammoth Hunt*, both based on the poetics of the Theater of the Absurd and staged in 1968, became special events in the history of Lithuanian theater and Lithuanian culture.[8] The theater began to speak to the audience in a new language, inspired by the works of Beckett and other representatives of the Theater of the Absurd. The new plays attracted audiences with their bold ideas and striking expression, combining words with image, sound, and movement.

The performances were quite popular. As poet Marcelijus Martinaitis remembered:

> The corridor was so crowded that you could barely find a place to put your foot. That close contact with almost unfamiliar audience alone reminded me of standing in a queue to buy herring, a 'doctor's' sausage, or blue chicken called 'broiler' on the eve of various propaganda holidays. No performance today can give the impression of such collective participation. I'm afraid to say that this was such a one-time and maybe the last theater performance in Lithuania in which I also participated, standing on one leg, as it is fitting the Theater of the Absurd; and [even] after a few decades, I remember it vividly (Martinaitis 2009: 237).

The image of the pit was associated with the reality of that time. According to another member of the audience, Venclova: "It was obvious – although one should not have voiced it out – that *The Pit* speaks about the situation of all of us at that time: a historical and cultural pit of occupation in which we live not because of our fault and to which everyone reacts differently, and not everyone has hope of overcoming it [..].

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8   Writer Kazys Saja was awarded the 2022 Lithuanian National Prize for Culture and Arts for his lifetime achievements and for "mammoth" hunting in theater and prose.

But beyond political allegory, something even more interesting was hiding – a universal metaphor about human existence, about their entanglement in a temporary existence, about their hopes that will never be fulfilled and without which it is nevertheless impossible to live" (Venclova 2009: 240–241).

In another play, *Marathon*, the actors of the Corridor Theater expressed the absurdity of Soviet existence by running continuously on the spot throughout the entire performance (for about one hour), still not losing hope of reaching the finish line. Such plays were considered dangerous because they forced the audience to think. Ambrasas's sister eloquently describes the reaction of the audience after the performance: "At the end of the performance, everybody sat in silence for a long time, no one got up or applauded, [they just] sat and pondered in silence" (Reimerienė 2009: 285).

Venclova later recalled how the performances brought young people together in a secret community of intellectuals. After the discussion of *Marathon*, where "no one talked about the essence of the performance – it was obvious anyway [..] – the four of us went to my apartment: Arvydas Ambrasas, Algis Nasvytis, Virgilijus Čepaitis and I [..]. We did not talk much about the performance [..]. In any case, we talked about a lot of things that were on our minds at that time, including the situation in Ukraine. At that time, the news had reached us that an active dissident movement had been developing there which the government feared much more than in Lithuania, and therefore oppressed it more. I told a three-year-old story, which had reached me just now, about Sergei Parajanov's film *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*" (Venclova 2009: 244).

In the *The Mammoth Hunt*, playwright Saja openly mocked the Soviet system. The audience could easily read the symbols and allegories offered by the theater. They understood that the quartet dressed in carnival costumes, who search and never find the promised celebration and finally get stuck in the tar, are actually looking for the bright future of communism. The "Soviet people" were portrayed as carrying balloons and umbrellas and moving in unison during the performance, like two herds of sheep. The director portrayed a dismally meaningless unity. The impression of mass was reinforced by Modris Tenisons's pantomime troupe that played the shadows of the actors.

The main idea of the performance was expressed in the poster by the artist Jūratė Malinauskaitė: a crowd of tiny faceless people in the shape of a huge ram obediently following a shepherd playing a reedpipe. The meadow in their background looks suspiciously like a map of the USSR. The director saw the reasons for the success of this performance in the text itself: "In the text and in the subtexts, such big explosives were hidden that people saw and enjoyed them very much" (Jurašas 2005: 29). The playwright admitted that the stage made the grotesque he created even more penetrating: "Many people, when they think of *The Mammoth Hunt*, have

said that it has been my best performance [..]. The fact that you liked *The Mammoth Hunt* is not my fault; the responsibility of the theater and, above all, of Jurašas" (Saja 2005: 108–109).

The Mammoth Hunt was an exceptionally successful performance. Today we would call it a cult performance. New aesthetic expression and critical political allusions to the existing system caused an explosion in Lithuania's cultural life. People may have watched it without realizing it, but according to the writer Aldona Liobytė, "it was a matter of honor. The audience flooded into the theater to see the performance not only from all over Lithuania but also from Latvia" (Liobytė 1995: 98).

According to Shakespeare, quoted in *The Pit*, a play is the mirror of society. The audience of both performances saw in that mirror an abnormal and inverted world: a "pit". The characters in *The Mammoth Hunt* (the Gypsy woman, the Nun, and others) travel to the celebration, hiding their self and denying their true identity. The audience saw how twisted the existence of the characters who hide their true identity or have lost their identity is; how naive and unworthy of freedom Caesar, Ophelius, Benedick and the gravediggers from *The Pit*, and the characters of *The Mammoth Hunt* disguised as a gypsy, a nun, and a chimney sweeper are.

The problem of the identity of the characters was further strengthened by Jurašas's use of performers from Modris Tenisons's pantomime troupe in *The Mammoth Hunt*, who "duplicated" the protagonists, following them like shadows. It was adventurously bold to show such a potrayal of Soviet-era reality. However, the courage paid off. Many audience members were able to see the performances which became legendary. This kind of drama and staging provoked the reader and the viewer to realize: this is not the way it should be, not the way to live; we need to change ourselves and the world we live in. Many people who saw these performances had changed the way they think, the way they look at art and reality.

The backlash of censorship: the dramatic finale of the history of the Theater of the Absurd

Saja's *The Mammoth Hunt*, written in Aesopian language, initially successfully "overcame" the censors – it was included in the theater's repertoire (premiering on December 31, 1968). Lionginas Šepetys, the Minister of Culture, accepted the play as an inevitable necessity and gave permission to stage it; Saja's play was also published. However, the subsequent history of the activities of the censorship is worthy of a special attention. Saja explains the mechanisms of the censorship power at that time in his memoirs.

According to the playwright, "complaints began pouring in, maybe to the security service, maybe to Moscow. And Moscow specially sent someone from the Ministry of Culture. He saw the play and said: "This is an anti-Soviet play, shut it down immediately." And Zhukov, with his authority as a representative of the all-Union Ministry of Culture, removed the play [from the repertoire]."[9] This decision had to be formalized by the theater management.

Less than a year after the premiere[10], Romualdas Trumpa, Kaunas State Theater director, announced that the performance *The Mammoth Hunt* directed by Jurašas "will not be included in the repertoire of the following months of this season, as it has a negative effect on a certain group of spectators". In addition to the communist theater staff, "comrade" Pupienis, a representative of the Lithuanian Communist Party City Committee, also attended the meeting. He openly declared that *The Mammoth Hunt* "points the finger at and knocks down the trust in our party and government. Some strata of society, hostile to Soviet society, enjoy it and use it for bad purposes. Today when the ideological struggle is especially acute, this perform-ance is untimely" (Dapšytė 2007: 69–78). However, the official also admitted that he could not say a single critical word about the "artistic level" of the performance.

The events unfolded further. Saja remembers: "What happened next was that Šepetys, who was friends and got along very well with [Yekaterina] Furtseva, the Minister of Culture of the entire Soviet Union, complained to Zhukov. And Zhukov was removed from the Ministry of Culture, but *The Mammoth Hunt* was not resumed [..]. Some time later, Zhukov accompanied the Polish delegation; Jerzy Sokolowski, the chairman of the Polish Repertory Commission, asked what Saja could offer to the Polish theater from the current Lithuanian dramaturgy. While Saja was thinking for a long time, Zhukov broke the silence: 'What about *The Mammoth Hunt*?' It turns out that paradoxes are useful not only in plays, they also exist in life."[11]

The student theater of the State Art Institute of Lithuania staged two more performances: *Marathon* and *Monday Afternoon* written by Ambrasas and Midvikis.

9   Lithuanian National Broadcaster's radio program *Pirmas sakinys* (The First Sentence). *Teatro mamutas Kazys Saja* (Kazys Saja, the Theater Mammoth), November 25, 2021; hosted by Mindaugas Nastaravičius and Tomas Vaiseta. https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/2000187829/pirmas-saki-nys-teatro-mamutas-kazys-saja.

10   The premiere took place on December 31, 1968; the performance was banned from Novem-ber 1969. (Putinaitė 2019: 255–261).

11   Lithuanian National Broadcaster's radio program *Pirmas sakinys* (The First Sentence). *Teatro mamutas Kazys Saja* (Kazys Saja, the Theater Mammoth), November 25, 2021; hosted by Mindaugas Nastaravičius and Tomas Vaiseta. https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/2000187829/pirmas-saki-nys-teatro-mamutas-kazys-saja.

The theater was closed at the end of 1970, right after the death of Ambrasas. In February 1970, Beckett's play *Act Without Words I*, which had just been translated into Lithuanian, was performed at the theater directed by Ambrasas, with Mečislovas Ščepavičius playing the protagonist. On April 17, 1971, "the three plays appeared on stage for the last time: nevertheless, a few gatekeepers of ideology [..] saw in them a political attack and banned further performances, and therefore their publishing" (Venclova 2009: 245). At the end of 1972, Rimgaudas Karvelis, actor and amateur filmmaker at the Youth Theater, made a 10-minute film based on the play *Act Without Words I*, referring to the deceased Ambrasas as director in the credits and instead calling himself "director-cameraman". Ščepavičius once again played the protagonist. The film was screened at amateur festivals in Estonia and Poland, but not without a thunderbolt – at the beginning of the film, Karvelis added images from the life of the "rotting capitalist world" (Gasiliūnas 2011).

The lives of the young playwrights Arvydas Ambrasas (1947–1970) and Arvydas Stasiulevičius (1947–1971) had been tragically cut short. The self-immolation of Romas Kalanta, who died protesting against the Soviet government of Lithuania on May 14, 1972 in Kaunas, caused an enormous public outcry. Violent repressions and the hunt for enemies of the system intensified in all spheres of social life, including culture.

On August 8, 1972, theater director Jurašas wrote an open letter to the Minister of Culture of the LSSR pointing out that his performances were being mutilated by the censors (later, the letter appeared in the London publication *Index on Censorship*). This was the first public letter of protest during the Soviet regime in Lithuania. The next day, Jurašas was removed from his position as principal director of Kaunas Drama Theater and barred from working in the theater. In 1974, after a year and a half of persecution by the KGB, the director and his wife were expelled from the USSR without the right to return. The period of modernism and avant-gardism in Lithuanian drama and theater, which began brightly and promisingly, was over.

Conclusions   The shift of Lithuanian drama from romantic and poetic historical plays to the depiction of the Soviet present using the poetics of the Theater of the Absurd is linked to the imperatives of resistance. The historical dramas reminded of the struggles for freedom, whereas the new plays encouraged viewers to perceive the absurdity of their present and to critically evaluate Soviet reality. Modern Western drama had encouraged attention to the inner world of the individual and to the value of the personality. The works by Lithuanian diaspora play-wrights that secretly reached Lithuania, acquaintance with the works of Polish and other Eastern Bloc playwrights, and translations of Western plays became a source

of ideas on how to talk about the absurdity of the Soviet reality through new dramatic forms.

The shift to the new way of representing Soviet reality, based on modern dramatic poetics, took place in both state and student theater. The two cases of the 1968 plays of the Theater of the Absurd show that a leap forward took place, that playwrights and theater directors were able to prepare it and that the audience understood the new language of theater.

Lithuanian playwrights began creating their own variations on Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Esslin's observations on how accurately *Waiting for Godot* was understood by the prisoners of San Quentin Prison were echoed by the human experience of the Soviet era – both in the Warsaw theater, where the Polish audience did not hesitate to perceive Godot as a metaphor for the ever-coming independence from Russia, and in the original plays by Lithuanian playwrights. These plays used elements of the poetics of the Theater of the Absurd: absurd and paradoxical situations, depictions of the environment, types of characters, and a specific and incoherent language.

Saja in *The Mammoth Hunt* and Ambrasas and Midvikis in *The Pit* depicted the "Soviet people's" rush towards the "bright tomorrow" – a celebration, the White City – that had remained an unattainable dream. The discrepancy between reality and the "higher" goal that unites everyone is also taken from Godot.

The absurdity of the Soviet reality was also revealed in the characters' discomfort with the alien setting. The characters in the play try to adapt, however unsuccessfully. In *The Mammoth Hunt*, the characters from the countryside wander the streets of an unfamiliar city, trying to be in a joyful mood. In *The Pit*, the characters who once lived in the White City now spend their days in a pit, trying to engage in some kind of activity.

The portrayal of the characters shows the self-control typical of the Soviet era and the fear of showing one's true identity. The characters who hide their identities in *The Mammoth Hunt* identify themselves with the carnival roles of Gypsy, Nun, Organ Grinder, and others. Even though they are hiding under carnival clothes, occasionally a message about their true identity breaks through. The true selves of the characters are also hidden under their language of primitive puns. In *The Pit*, the characters also conceal themselves behind the roles they play (alluding to the characters in Shakespeare's works), and they quote *Hamlet*.

In *The Mammoth Hunt*, features of the Theater of the Absurd intertwine with the intonations of folk humor and political and social satire, while in *The Pit* the playwrights employ quotations testifying to intellect and education. In both plays, the characters demonstrate their initiative and activity, which unfortunately does not help them to achieve their desired goal (especially in the case of Ambrasas and Midvikis's

play *Marathon*). All of this allows us to talk about the differences between the plays created in the Soviet era and the Western Theater of the Absurd described by Esslin, as well as about the specific model of the Lithuanian (or Soviet-era authors') Theater of the Absurd.

Conditional drama confused the censors and allowed the works to pass through the eyes of the censors onto the stage. Only a year later they realized the message that those performances were conveying to the audience. The boom of the Theater of the Absurd, which had been going on for several years, was suppressed. *The Mammoth Hunt*, with over 70 performances according to official figures, was banned after its first season run. The Corridor Theater was closed down. However, Saja's reminiscences about the ban of *The Mammoth Hunt* show that censorship was at that time influenced by power games and contained double standards.

The breakthrough in the search for a new drama and theatrical language in Lithuania in the late 1960s and early 1970s did happen, although it was gradually suppressed. However, after Kalanta's world-famous protest against the Soviet government in 1972, for more than a decade modern dramatic and theatrical explorations and translations were banned (a collection of 20th-century Western drama was published only in 1984), as had been the case in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary after earlier attempts to resist the Soviet regime.

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