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## **Balys Sruoga's Vision of the Future of the Theatre from the Nazi Concentration Camp in Stutthof**

### **Baļa Srogas skatījums uz teātra nākotni no nacistu koncentrācijas nometnes Štuthofā**

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#### **Atslēgvārdi:**

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## Summary

This article discusses two letters sent by the writer and scholar Balys Sruoga from the concentration camp in Stutthof to his wife Vanda Sruogienė. One of these letters was written on May 31, 1944 and later published under the title *Teatro romantika* (The Romanticism of Theatre), and the other was written on June 5, 1944 and later published as *Tikroviškumas vaidybos mene* (Verisimilitude in the Art of Acting). In these letters, their writer summarizes the state of the art of theatre on the background of the humanitarian catastrophe in the middle of the 20th century, and offers his prospects for theatre's evolution. The analysis of Sruoga's letters aims to determine what kind of evaluation criteria he set for the creators of the future theatre, and to compare these criteria with the theatrical language used by the director Gintaras Varnas in his performance *Natanas Išmintingasis* (Nathan the Wise) in 2017. After examining the aesthetic and value aspects outlined by Balys Sruoga, we can discern a dialogue with his vision of the future theatre in modern Lithuanian theatre practices. We can surmise that Sruoga's longing for what he termed "*dvasios viešpatystė*" (the lordship of spirit) is the beauty of utopia presented in the performance of *Nathan the Wise* as staged by Gintaras Varnas in 2017.

## Kopsavilkums

Šajā rakstā aplūkotas divas Baļa Srogas (*Balys Sruoga*) vēstules sievai Vandai Srogienei (*Vanda Sruogienė*): 1944. gada 31. maijā rakstītā, kas vēlāk publicēta ar nosaukumu "Teātra romantika", un 1944. gada 5. jūnijā rakstītais "Reālisms aktiermākslā". Savās vēstulēs rakstnieks aplūko teātra mākslas stāvokli 20. gadsimta vidus humanitārās katastrofas laikā un piedāvā savas perspektīvas teātra attīstībai. Srogas vēstļu analīzes mērķis ir noskaidrot, kādus vērtēšanas kritērijus viņš izvirzījis nākotnes teātra veidotājiem, un salīdzināt viņa redzējumu ar ideālās pasaules vīziju, kas rādīta režisora Gintara Varnas 2017. gada iestudējumā "Nātans Gudrais". Izpētot Baļa Srogas formulētos estētikas un vērtību aspektus, mēs varam mūsdienā Lietuvas teātra praksē saskatīt dialogu ar Srogas nākotnes teātra vīziju. Varam izteikt minējumu, ka viņa ilgas pēc tā, ko viņš nosauca par "*dvasios viešpatystė*" (gara/garīgo dominanci), ir tas pats utopijas skaistums, kas parādīts Gintara Varnas iestudētajā "Nātana Gudrā" izrādē 2017. gadā.

## Introduction

Balys Sruoga – poet, prose writer, playwright, theatre scholar, researcher of literature and folklore, translator and publicist – was born on 2 February, 1896 in Baibokai of Vabalninkas district in North-Eastern Lithuania, and died in Vilnius on 16 October, 1947. The creative legacy that Balys Sruoga has left us after his quite short life of 51 year was published in a collection of seventeen books in 1996.

In this article, we will limit our analysis of Balys Sruoga's oeuvre as a theatre scholar to the two-year period between 1943 and 1945, which is defined by his experience in the Nazi concentration camp at Stutthof. By applying descriptive and analytical method, we will discuss two letters sent by Sruoga from the concentration camp to his wife Vanda Sruogienė. One of these letters was written on May 31, 1944 and later published under the title *Teatro romantika* (The Romanticism of Theatre) and the other was written on June 5, 1944 and later published as *Tikroviškumas vaidybos mene* (Verisimilitude in the Art of Acting). The aim of this study is to determine what kind of evaluation criteria Sruoga set for the creators of the future theatre, and to compare these criteria with the theatrical language used by the director Gintaras Varnas in his performance of *Natanas Išmintingasis* (Nathan the Wise), which was based on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's play *Nathan der Weise* (1779) (Lessing 2015).

Thus, comparative method has been applied to Sruoga's concept of "the lordship of spirit" and to the idea of religious tolerance expressed in Varnas's production of *Nathan the Wise*, emphasizing the therapeutic and utopian character of the "ideal world". This comparative approach helps to highlight the similarities and differences between these two perspectives on theatre, and shows the potential for growth and development within the theatrical arts.

On 16 March 1943, Balys Sruoga was taken captive by the Nazis and transported to the Stutthof concentration camp near Gdansk in Poland, where he managed to survive and also was able to correspond with friends and relatives who had remained in Lithuania, as well as with close friends and colleagues who had left the country. (The camp was liberated in 1945, and on May 13 of that year Sruoga was flown to the then Soviet-occupied Lithuania.)

Before becoming an inmate of Stutthof, Sruoga was an experienced theatre critic. Since his study years in Saint Petersburg, Moscow and Munich, Sruoga had not only been inseparable from the practical activities of Lithuanian professional theatre, but had also achieved fame as a popular, acute reviewer. His reviews influenced the process of theatre development, and the theatre seminar that Sruoga taught at the University of Lithuania (since 1930 known as Vytautas Magnus University) established the Lithuanian school of theatre criticism and laid the foundations for

research of the history of Lithuanian theatre. In a brief summary, Prof. Rasa Vasinauskaitė has formulated the merits of Balys Sruoga as a theatre critic as follows: “[H]e created the canon of Lithuanian drama theatre [...]” (Vasinauskaitė 2019). (Here and elsewhere – translations by the author of the article.) She offers this statement about Sruoga’s canonical insights on theatre in her article *Kritika kaip teatro dokumentas. Balio Sruogos atvejis* (Criticism as a Theatre Document. The Case of Balys Sruoga). Vasinauskaitė rationalizes this statement by the broad education that Sruoga had, arguing that he “began to form the criteria of this canon while studying in Moscow (1916 to 1918), absorbing the Russian culture of the threshold between nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or the “silver age”, which he knew through Jurgis Baltrušaitis, the verse by the Symbolist poets, the productions by Konstantin Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), as well as the First and Second MAT studios, along with the opera performances of the Moscow Bolshoi Theatre” (Vasinauskaitė 2019). We can agree that one can link Sruoga’s theatre criticism and theatre knowledge to the Eastern European theatrical movements and practices but, as regards the analysis of these practices, I believe it is worthwhile to consider the methodological approach developed during his studies at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (*Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München*). Balys Sruoga enrolled at this university in November of 1921 and studied there until February 8, 1924. The main focus of his learning were courses in Slavonic and Germanic studies, but in retrospect, his participation at Professor Arthur Kutscher’s (1878–1960) theatre seminar and the theatre history courses taught by the same professor played the greatest role in encouraging Sruoga’s interest in the history of the theatre and gave him a more profound understanding of the subject. Kutscher’s seminar set the methodological foundations for theatre research in Germany. He collaborated actively with the theatre scholar Max Hermann (1865–1942) in establishing the German Institute for Theatre Studies. At Kutscher’s seminar, Sruoga studied the history and theory of German theatre. He got acquainted with the still nascent field of comparative German theatre studies and also with the method of reconstructing a performance, which the theatre scholar Max Herrmann had already been successfully applying in his work as he was writing the history of German theatre. We can describe the period of Sruoga’s studies at the University of Munich as a crucial period during which he may have formed his idea of a theatre seminar as a scientific and practical laboratory of theatre processes, which he later taught during his professorship at the University of Lithuania.

As already noted, Balys Sruoga had earned a reputation in the field of theatre criticism as a competent, sharp polemicist. Reviewing the theatre activities of the first decade of the Lithuanian State Theatre and the performances by directors

Konstantinas Glinskis, Antanas Sutkus, and Borisas Dauguvietis, and actively collaborating with the director Andrius Olekas Žilinskas during the following years, Sruoga, as pointed out by Vasinauskaitė, shaped not only the drama canon but also the “value signposts” for Lithuanian theatre criticism. According to her, Sruoga’s criteria for evaluating theatre “are very simple – professionalism, artistic purposefulness (artistry) and commitment to the people” (Vasinauskaitė 2019: 51). However, the new, tragic reality of the Stutthof camp may have influenced his evaluation of the previous theatre processes. In Sruoga’s argumentation, we can clearly spot the difference between the theatre of his present and his conception of the theatre of the future. This separation seems to imply a revision of his previous experience and a desire to search for a new, different kind of theatre.

Sruoga’s letters from the Stutthof concentration camp stand apart from all his other texts on theatre: not only by their epistolary genre, but also by their emotional and intellectual context. The job that the author of these letters held in the camp office protected him from the gas chamber, but not from the experience of being a prisoner of the Nazis. In his book *Dievy miškas* (The Forest of the Gods, 1957), Sruoga has ironically summed up the consequences of Nazi ideology: the crisis of humanity in the mid-20th century was accompanied by the smell of... burnt human flesh (Sruoga 2021). One can possibly view Sruoga’s letters about the theatre of the future as an outline of a scientific hypothesis, but also as a vision motivated by a denial of his current existence that was filled with traumatic experiences.

Therefore, the theoretical context that one can associate with Balys Sruoga’s ideas of the future of theatre is not only that of the field of the humanities, but also of the social sciences. After examining the aesthetic and value aspects outlined in Sruoga’s letters, we can look for a dialogue between his vision and the Lithuanian theatre practices of today. The issue of cultural dialogicality that Mikhail Bakhtin raised and analyzed in his cultural studies (Bakhtin 1996) can explain how the traumatic past experience of Balys Sruoga connects with our present – namely, with contemporary theatre directors who face new challenges.

The dialogical form of Sruoga’s letters reveals emphasizes the shift in place and time from a catastrophic present to a predictable dissimilar future. We can better understand the utopian character of his vision of the future through the concept of moving objects or ideas into a space or time that does not yet exist. Let us remember Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) who is considered to be the author of the *Capriccio* technique, which can be used to transport a historical object to another time and place, creating new links with the object to be replicated, and the context of a new environment (Piranesi 2011). This technique is also used in modern architecture, fine arts and photography.

There have been several scholars that have studied the aesthetic aspect of Balys Sruoga's letters: Gabija Bankauskaitė-Sereikienė in her monograph *Balys Sruoga – tarp tradicijos ir modernumo* (Balys Sruoga – Between Tradition and Modernity) (Bankauskaitė-Sereikienė 2007), Algis Samulionis in his book *Balys Sruoga – dramaturgas ir teatro kritikas* (Balys Sruoga – Dramatist and Theatre Critic) (Samulionis 1986), and Aušra Martišiūtė in her essay *Poetinio teatro vizija Balio Sruogos "Pavasario giesmėje"* (The Vision of the Poetic Theatre in Balys Sruoga's Play "The Chant of Spring") (Martišiūtė 2005). These studies have established the connection between the term "romanticist art" and poetic theatre, and linked the vision of future theatre to the poetics of syncretic theatre. A valuable source that has revealed the emotional contexts of Balys Sruoga's letters from Stutthof was Jurgis Blekaitis's detailed contemporary testimony *Balys Sruoga: asmuo ir teatro kūrėjas* (Balys Sruoga: the Person and the Theatre-maker) published in Munich as early as 1948 (Blekaitis 1948). As regards the therapeutic overtones of Sruoga's vision of the future on the background of his traumatic experience in a specific place and time – this phenomenon might also be analyzed by employing the findings and theories of the trauma researcher Judith Lewis Herman (see, for instance: Herman 1992). Drawing on the insights and methodological approaches of the aforementioned scholars, we will seek to reveal the main features of Balys Sruoga's conception of the future theatre.

## **Balys Sruoga on the Stylistic Expression of Mid-20th Century Theatre**

The already mentioned two letters by Sruoga about theatre were written five days apart, and the second letter substantially complements and extends the analysis of the present and future theatre outlined in the first letter. The author constantly revises the terminology that he uses in both letters, expanding the semantic field of these terms.

Sruoga employs terms familiar to art history – such as "naturalistic" and "realistic". (He uses the term "naturalistic theatre" more often.) Sruoga perceives the expression of naturalistic theatre as a direct reflection of reality (with reality understood as nature). Extending the concept of nature, Sruoga sees the strategy of translating nature into a work of art as a direct transfer of objects from the reality into the artistic totality of the performance. He makes a distinction between the objects of reality and the objects used on the stage, and describes their different effects as follows: "The reality on stage is very different from the true reality. For example, a golden crown (made of real gold) makes no impression on the spectator, whereas a crown made of shiny paper is very impressive. A heart made of red fabric (e.g. flannel)

is more impressive than a heart of meat." (Sruoga 1994: 263). He characterizes naturalistic theatre or realistic theatre as a "non-aesthetic" reality.

The most complicated is the use of the term "romanticist" in both letters. Their author observes that the concept of romanticism has not been developed, and takes up this task with vigour. He notes that there is an "old romanticism" associated with the 19th century art of the early Saxon Romantic period. In addition to that, Sruoga uses a term "new romanticism", not linking it to the romantic style but to the romanticist, poetic theatre. He employs the term "poetic theatre" to describe the future theatrical strategy and techniques.

In the Nazi camp, Balys Sruoga continued his work as a writer and theatre scholar: he wrote the comedies *Pagunda* (Temptation), *Prancišiuko marškinėliai* (The Shirts of Little Pranciškus), *Uošvė* (Mother-in-Law), *Dobilėlis penkialapis* (The Lovely Five-Leaved Clover) and the poetic drama *Pavasario giesmė* (The Chant of Spring"), as well as the articles *Apie estetinę ir anestetinę tikrovę* (On Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic Reality) and *Apie dramaturgijos pradžiodalas* (On the Beginnings of Dramaturgy). He thoroughly explores the principles of reflecting reality in the work of art, as if building a bridge to the future playwright's attitude towards reality: "True comedies and tragedies in real life do not proceed in a way which is necessary for theatre. Even the most "natural" playwright has to compose the events of life: to juxtapose some facts, to omit others, to create new ones that did not exist, to change other facts again, etc." (Sruoga 1994: 265). The opposition between the facts of reality and the transformations of these facts in the artistic, imagined reality may vary but nevertheless, in the process of creating a drama, the author has an inspiring power to reduce, increase or unpredictably change them. The tool that determines the distance between the fact of reality and its reflection in the artwork is the artist's idea. Sruoga denotes the process of transforming the facts of reality by the term "stylization". We should note, though, that he finds the starting point of creative experience in the natural reality.

As regards acting, the experience of the actor and their emotional involvement is inseparable from creating a role in realistic theatre. *Verisimilitude in acting*, according to Sruoga, is indispensable: "Verisimilitude is more necessary in theatre than in other fields. Here, verisimilitude involves psychology and the logic of events. [...] When a character or a situation is given, that character or situation can behave according to the general laws of psychology. If you don't do that in the theatre, you get a dog with its nose attached to its side, not to its head. So the verisimilitude of the action on stage is based on the laws of psychology, in short: the action is based on the verisimilitude of the character and the situation." (Sruoga 1994: 266).

In the context of the stylistic trends that had emerged in the contemporary

theatre, Sruoga writes the following: "We have already lived through the epochs of naturalism and realism [...]. Everything we have learned from realism must be used. But realism, as the following of nature, is the lower stage of art – the preparatory stage. It only serves as a means, only as a way, to seek the understanding in the audience. That is the legacy. [...] So realism, as the following of nature, is not the goal, it is only a means. We have higher artistic goals." (Sruoga 1994: 262).

In order to summarize the stylistic features of the then contemporary theatre and their evaluation by Balys Sruoga, let us highlight his insights into the psychological method of acting. He describes this method as a natural characteristic of theatre, evaluates it in a very positive way, and elaborates on it by referring to the theatrical practices of Konstantin Stanislavski. It is noteworthy that when describing the technique of acting in psychological (or realistic, as Sruoga uses these terms synonymously) theatre, he characterizes it as an active interpretation of the facts of life, with the actors transforming themselves into roles inseparable from the emotional truth. Sruoga hopes to leave the features of realistic and naturalistic theatre styles in the past. The pursuit of scenic truth, according to him, separates an artist from a craftsman and, be it noted, frees him or her from a dialogical approach to the achievements of theatrical art and from the opposition between "real" and "fake" scenic life, because a dialogue with the skills and abilities acquired in the theatre of the past can broaden and enrich the theatre-makers of the future.

## **A Vision for the New Theatre**

In his letters, Balys Sruoga presents his arguments on why the approach to theatre-making principles should be changed. In a way, he sets a goal to refute the practices of his present and encourages artists to take up new challenges. In his vision of the future theatre, one can see its mission, creative principles and goals in the bright light of innovative reforms.

How does Balys Sruoga, a graduate of Eastern and Western universities, a member of the European academic community, an artist and a Nazi prisoner, see the new times through the window of a concentration camp barrack in 1944, a year before the end of the war in Europe? His vision of the future is striking in its difference from the dehumanized present: "[N]ow that materialism has fallen, the mighty lordship of spirit will begin" (Sruoga 1994: 263). What are the reasons for the collapse of the materialistic worldview, according to Sruoga? "The physiological worship of matter has led mankind into war. Humanity is paying dearly for this sin. Materialism has brought so much sorrow, horror and misery to humanity" (Sruoga 1994: 263). In his censored letter, Sruoga does not elaborate on the political and social causes of



the catastrophic present. He only notes that humanity has grown tired of the disasters brought by materialism and no longer wants to know anything about it; after the war, one no longer wants to see the cruel and dirty life on the stage. Sruoga suggests to follow a new creative strategy: "We do not imitate life, but we create a new world out of the material of life" (Sruoga 1994: 263). He knows the name of this new world: "After materialism comes the great epoch of idealism" (Sruoga 1994: 263).

Images of the ideal city or the ideal state have been with the humankind since Ancient Greece and the Renaissance. Thus, the vision of a new world echoes the humanity's long-standing aspiration to see a different, still unexperienced but desirable new reality. Let us note that it is not political ideas, urban images or objects brought to life by mnemonic techniques that a writer transports into the utopian time that has not yet come (and probably will never come), but the soul of the artist. It may seem that Balys Sruoga is implementing the lordship of spirit in his image of the future world – and creating a new home for this spirit in the theatre of the future.

In the new world ruled by the spirit, the mission of the theatre will also be changed. In Sruoga's programmatic statements, we can see several steps: the theatre of the future is meant to revive, if not to resurrect, the human being which is in a crisis of humanism: "After the war, a human must awaken as human. Human beings must become aware that they must become sublime. Human sublimity must be awakened by the healing emotion of catharsis." (Sruoga 1994: 264).

Sruoga formulates the next step in the same categorical way: "Our work must console people. Console them in a higher sense. Our art has to awaken in one's heart all that belongs to eternity." (Sruoga 1994: 254). His message to the theatre artist of the future is that traumatic experiences are not a generational problem; they have accompanied humanity in all historical periods. Therefore, Sruoga believes that the theatre of the future will have a therapeutic mission. One can relate his concept of catharsis to the theories of catharsis in the theatre of the past (from the Aristotelian theory to its numerous interpretations in the Enlightenment and the Modernist era), and to a rethinking of the meanings and power of this concept in the postmodern era. Sruoga's idealistic vision of the theatre as the lordship of spirit aspires to heal the human being torn by the crises of civilization, to revitalize the spiritual vision, and to direct it towards eternity. The latter interpretation of the concept of catharsis and the idea of healing through spiritual practices and rituals distinguishes Balys Sruoga from other Lithuanian theatre scholars of that time. It connects his visions to the directors of the late 20th century modern theatre who were also exploring the power of spiritual practices.

Can these goals of the lordship of spirit really be achieved in the theatre? Can its field of power reach into eternity? Let us leave this aspect to the researchers of

theatrical utopias or to the specialists on eternity. Balys Sruoga does not specify the features or qualities of the eternity, nor does he attribute to it the qualities presumed by any religious denomination. For him, eternity is another, ideal *reality that does not exist* in real world. Therefore, the aspect of the lordship of spirit brings his vision of the future world (which, according to Sruoga, we can create in the theatre) closer to the utopia of an *ideal reality* on which the light of eternity falls.

What about the aesthetic features of the future theatre? According to Sruoga, the theatre creates an aesthetic reality to which the real world is only the initial stage. Sruoga discusses the process of transforming the real world through his own experience and his knowledge about the art of acting. He describes this transformation process as follows and concludes by a rhetorical question: "Theatre continues to "poeticize" life, and it must continue to do so, otherwise it cannot be. Thousands of real features (lines, colours, sounds, movements, shadows, etc.) are always omitted, and new features are brought in (set design, gestures, intonations, nuances, etc.). So if the nature of theatre is to rearrange life on the stage, how can the task of theatre be to represent life?" (Sruoga 1994: 266). Let us pay attention to the aforementioned components of the performance: set design, movements, and music. Sruoga lists them as equal components of the performance. Let us add the following: it was as early as in Max Hermann's method of reconstructing performances that isolated these parts of the performance as a whole, and in reconstructing a performance the aim was to reconstruct not only its textual features, but also the audio-visual.

What is the power that joins all elements of the performance into a visual image of a new, aesthetic reality? Balys Sruoga has no doubt: one has "to "poeticize" reality in such a way that the "poeticizing" evokes aesthetic emotions (Sruoga 1994: 266). In the theatre of the future, he sees the performance as an artwork inspired by an artistic idea where the aesthetic aspect is inseparable from the principle of artistic integrity: "Stylization, then, is not an attempt to give the artwork one style or another, but to fit its parts together according to the idea of an artistic whole" (Sruoga 1994: 266). The artistic means of expression provide the performance with "new imprints" and are a part of its artistic whole. In modern Western European theatre, this quest for an indivisible whole has been carried out since the time of the reformist and avant-garde directors, changing the structures of the performance integrity and seeking new principles for organizing the artistic integrity. Therefore, it seems that the principle of the artistic integrity of the performance, which Sruoga discussed in his letters, has reached the theatre of our time and is still valid, although the tactics chosen by the practitioners of the theatre today vary a lot and are, at times, astonishingly unpredictable.

In his vision of the new reality of theatre, Balys Sruoga sees a phenomenon

that, as he believes, should permeate the work by a professional artist. Using examples from different schools of acting that, according to him, are in conflict – “the art of natural experiences”, Konstantin Stanislavski’s method and aesthetic emotions, and also Denis Diderot’s theory –, Sruoga enters that part of creative processes which is connected with the mystery, the unconscious, and ecstasy. The latter part of his vision for the future of theatre is the least elaborated, and he presents it in a very laconic way, as an ideal aspiration: “The art of acting [...] must be the art of freedom-inspired creation, I would say, the art of ecstasy, the ecstatic art!” (Sruoga 1994: 267). While being a prisoner of a Nazi camp, he saw the theatre of the future as an experience of creative freedom and, perhaps, of the Dionysian beginnings of theatre. However, Sruoga does not write anything on the mystical practices of ecstasy. We can attribute the statement about freedom-inspired art not only to his own tragic experiences at Stutthof and in the Soviet Lithuania, but also to his desired, sought-after of the ideal, utopian world of the lordship of spirit, and to the state of the future world.

## **An Ideal World Presented by Director Gintaras Varnas in the Production of *Nathan the Wise***

The performance *Nathan the Wise*, staged by director Gintaras Varnas in 2017, was based on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s play *Nathan der Weise*, written in 1779. We will discuss it in terms of the narrative of an ideal future world and theatrical language. Both aspects relate to Balys Sruoga’s vision of the future of theatre and to his idea of “the lordship of spirit”, as well as to a poetic theatrical language dominated by the emotions of “healing catharsis”.

One can say that the said play contains a program for an ideal world order, which is described by its protagonist Nathan the Wise with the help of a symbol of a ring. The ring, according to Nathan, belongs to Christians, Jews and Muslims in the same way as the love of God and the human love belongs equally to people of different faiths. A world in which people share the same virtues is illuminated by the light of religious tolerance.

The perspectives of an ideal world are also represented in the plot of the five-act poetic drama. The young Templar Conrad and Nathan’s daughter Recha whom he rescues have to embrace the fact that they are a brother and a sister, and that their common family tree includes relatives who belong to three religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Lessing, the author of this Enlightenment-era humanist utopia, believed that the world can be saved with the idea of religious

tolerance. The action takes place in the blessed Jerusalem, at the Tomb of Christ, and in the Sultan's court. It is easy to imagine the settings of this poetic drama or even visit them today. However, unlike the all-embracing harmony depicted in Lessing's dream, the echoes of bloody religious wars continue to reverberate in present-day Jerusalem (and not just in Jerusalem) in the 21st century.

In the production by Gintaras Varnas, word and image serve as equal partners. While the performance of the actors shows features of the psychological or "experience" method of acting that Balys Sruoga recommended for the future theatre-makers, in the visual narrative of the performance we can spot an exceptional relationship between the image and the word. (It is noteworthy that the processes of space visualization in the theatres of Lithuania and Latvia are very similar, as testified by Zane Kreicberga et al. (2022).) The play's dialogues express feelings of doubt, reflection, wonder and discovery, while the images live an independent, often associative life – but nevertheless they are always in dialogue with the scene they depict.

In this production, the director has chosen the image of a book as the main symbol of religious identity. In contrast to the existing practices, in this performance Jews, Muslims and Christians are shown to have a single, common book. As the place and time of the action change and the characters' relationships transform, new pages of the book open up with the iconography of the scriptures. They combine Persian miniatures with Christian medieval engravings and facsimiles of Judean manuscripts. We can also discern the symbol of identity in the authentic ritual dress of Judeans and Muslims, as well as Christian bishops and monks. When declaring their identity, the characters choose a mannequin and seem to be trying to blend in with its religious attire.

Gintaras Varnas depicts the threat to the religious identity by Crusader battle scenes, showing a film with flying Templar knights and Muslims who attack or defend themselves, while refugees in the streets of a devastated city look up and stretch their arms towards the sky. In the last scene of the play, the visual narrative is completed with Nathan's wordless prayer surrounded by candles, stones and tombstones.

The visual narrative of the performance reminds us of an ideal world where religious harmony has been sought for so many centuries. According to Nathan, this harmony can be attained by choosing the humanist virtues and love. Traumatic experiences from religious wars can be overcome by retelling them. Retelling saves one from despair and, according to Balys Sruoga, heals the human soul. In a way, the director Gintaras Varnas has responded with his nostalgic images of an ideal world to the vision of a better future that the prisoner of a Nazi concentration camp had

long ago envisaged. We can surmise that his longing for “the lordship of spirit” is the beauty of utopia that is constantly being rediscovered.

## Conclusions

Balys Sruoga in his letters to his wife Vanda Sruogienė summarizes the state of the art of theatre on the background of the humanitarian catastrophe in the middle of the 20th century, and offers his prospects for the evolution of theatre.

Sruoga believes that naturalistic theatre only reflects direct reality and objects, and emphasizes that theatrical reality is perceived differently than actual reality. He argues that we must use what we have learned from the epochs of naturalism and realism, but only use it as a means to achieve higher artistic goals. Sruoga hopes to leave the characteristics of the realistic and naturalistic theatre styles in the past.

Sruoga states that in the theatre of the future the spirit will dominate and replace materialism. He believes that after the war one must awaken as a human and realize the importance of sincerity. This vision includes the transformative power of art, inviting both creators and audiences to embark on a journey towards healing, understanding, and connection with the eternal aspects of our existence. Sruoga also discusses the concept of “romanticism”, noting that there is old romanticism associated with romantic art, and “new romanticism” associated with poetic theatre.

Sruoga also talks about the creative process of staging a performance. He states that the language of theatre must be permeated with poetic means. Future theatrical performances, according to him, should create an aesthetic reality where the real world is just the primary level. The language of theatre should incite aesthetic emotions and be inseparably linked to spiritual phenomena.

The performance of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Natan the Wise*, staged by Gintaras Varnas at the Kaunas Drama Theatre, evokes a longing for an “ideal world” similar to what Balys Sruoga envisaged. The narrative of the play revolves around the idea of a world where religious tolerance is embraced. This concept is symbolized by a book that represents the love of God and human love shared by people from different faiths. The play explores the perspectives of religious tolerance through the characters of Conrad and Recha who realize they are brother and sister, with their relatives representing Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

Comparing Balys Sruoga’s concept of theatre with the performance by the director Gintaras Varnas, one can notice a synergy among these artistic creators. The representation of an “ideal world” in the contemporary Lithuanian theatre recalls the visionary aspect of Balys Sruoga’s theories about the theatre of the future.

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