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## To Transcend Trauma or to Internalize and Preserve It. Russian Exile Artists in Latvia

February 24, 2022, marked a turning point, after which it became necessary to radically reassess previous values, relationships, development paths, and the cultural landscapes a whole. The Baltic countries, particularly Latvia, have since become a focal point where significant shifts in public opinion regarding Russia, Russian culture, and cultural heritage are taking place. Contemporary figures of Russian culture are being reevaluated as well. Any collaboration between Latvian artists and their exiled Russian counterparts is often viewed as a political act, even when not intended as such.

This paper is devoted to the analysis of artworks created in Latvia by exile artists from Russia – namely, directors Dmitry Krymov and Yuriy Butusov, actors Chulpan Khamatova, Shamil Khamatov, and others – in the context of their political stances, statements, and integration into the Latvian cultural landscape. The paper should not be regarded as a comprehensive study within specific theoretical frameworks or paradigms but rather as a kind of ‘field research’ that gathers and interprets individual facts, without claiming broader generalizations.

**Keywords:** Russian exile, language, identity, integration

Edward Said, one of the most brilliant culture theorists of our time, pointed out in his quintessential essay *Reflections on Exile* that “[...] our age – with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers – is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration.”<sup>1</sup> Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has also forced countless artists from various fields into exile, as they protest against their country’s policies and thus seek to escape imprisonment and repression.

The experiences of Russian exiled artists are highly heterogeneous, thereby precluding the formulation of strict generalizations or the placement within a specific theoretical framework. The present paper is primarily an empirical study that aims to outline various approaches

<sup>1</sup> Said (2003), 174.

to overcoming exile-related trauma, based on the experiences of artists who have emigrated from Russia. Latvia – and, more broadly, the Baltic region – serves as a significant platform for Russian exile artists, given the persistent presence of a substantial Russian-speaking population (both citizens and non-citizens) since the Soviet occupation period, as well as the widespread understanding of Russian culture and language among the local population. This context provides exile artists with various opportunities: to integrate into the local cultural discourse working either in Latvian or in their native language; or to focus on their inner problems and develop parallel narratives. However, even the most favorable circumstances cannot erase the sense of trauma and loss:

“It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.”<sup>2</sup>

The article is based on reviews by the author herself and by other Latvian critics and critics of the Russian emigration diaspora, as well as artist interviews published in both Latvian and international media, including digital platforms.

Since 2022, Latvia has hosted numerous guest performances by artists emigrated from Russia, but these have had little impact on the broader theater scene. Far more significant are the productions created in Latvia in collaboration with local artists, or specifically designed for Latvian audiences. Among them, the most important are:

– Chulpan Khamatova’s performances at the New Riga Theatre, directed by Alvis Hermanis: *Post Scriptum* (2022), *Country of the Deaf* (2023), and *The Sect of the Dream Interpreters* (2024) – the latter being a collective performance that marked the company’s return to their renovated historic building; *Drive Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead* (2025, Dailes Theater);

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

- Dmitry Krymov's *Peter Pan. The Syndrome* (2024) at the Latvian National Theatre;
- Krymov's *Notes of Madmen* (2024), produced by Art Forte, staged in Rīga but primarily aimed at the global Russian diaspora, featuring Chulpan Khamatova (Rīga), Sukhanov (Berlin);
- Yuri Butusov's *Gogol. The Portrait* by Ester Bol (2024) at Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre;
- several productions at the Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre with the participation of exile actors: Viesturs Kairišs' stagings of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (2023) and Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (2025), as well as Sergei Golomazov's production of Albert Camus's *Caligula* (2024);

Of particular importance was the event that brought together artists who had emigrated from Russia and their colleagues from the Baltic states, and also created a platform for a fruitful discussion about the totalitarianism – the public reading of Marius Ivaškevičius' play *The Totalitarian Novel* (2024), produced by Evgenia Shermeneva, with KATLZS as the production company. The reading featured Khamatova (Rīga), Alexander Feklistov (Barcelona), Filip Grigoryan (Berlin), Alexander Filipenko (Vilnius), Darius Meshkauskas (Klaipėda), Egons Dombrovskis (Rīga), and Elena Fanailova (Rīga, Radio Svoboda). The play intertwined multiple parallel narratives: the playwright's personal experiences and conversations with other artists, travels through Central Asia; an elderly artist's search for lost paintings from his avant-garde youth; references to the fable about the 'mankurt' from Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov's novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, and the fate of Mikhail Bulgakov and his novel *The Master and Margarita*. All of these stories reflected on the complex relationship between art and power, resistance and conformism.

The abovementioned productions and artists could be categorized according to several criteria:

- based on the authorship of the artistic message – whether it is the director building a unique world and stage concept, or the actor participating either as a more or less independent co-author or merely as a performer;
- based on the presence or absence of a political message;

based on the extent of integration into the cultural space of Latvia – whether through participation in the work of local theatres and collaboration with local directors and colleagues, or through an ‘art for art’s sake’ approach rooted in a personal worldview and detached from local contexts.

In this study, the primary criterion is the first one, distinguishing between actors and directors, while also drawing on the other classification approaches as supplementary perspectives.

### Actors’ Choices: Taking Root and Integrating

It should be noted that the actor’s profession imposes certain conditions: in order to work permanently, one must either find a theatre willing to accept an emigrated artist or work within a project-based theatre system without attachment to any specific country. Several prominent Russian actors have chosen to join theatres in Rīga, thereby integrating into overall local cultural processes.

The greatest public resonance was caused by the arrival of actress **Chulpan Khamatova** (b. 1975) in Latvia, as in 2012 she had participated in Vladimir Putin’s presidential election campaign, recording a video in which she expressed gratitude for his support in building a children’s oncology center, and in 2014 she carried the Russian flag during the opening ceremony of the Sochi Olympics.

Khamatova arrived in Latvia almost immediately after the war escalated. Alvis Hermanis, the artistic director of the New Riga Theatre, invited her to join the company. Although she immediately condemned the military invasion of Ukraine and left Russia, protests against her continued. The controversy intensified further when she was awarded the National Theater Award for her solo performance *Post Scriptum* (2022). The performance itself was also nominated for the National Prize.

Chulpan Khamatova’s monodrama in Russian, *Post Scriptum*, was performed at the New Riga Theatre mere months after her arrival. It conveyed an unambiguous and clear message about the violent policies of the Russian authorities, directed against its own citizens as well. The plot unfolded on several levels: present-day events seen through the



i. Production of *Post Scriptum* (1922) at New Riga Theatre. Director Alvis Hermanis. Chulpan Khamatova – monk Tikhon. Photo – Jānis Deinats

eyes of a lonely teacher; a reading, inspired by one of her students, of an unpublished chapter from Dostoevsky's novel *Demons*; and a story about the hostage crisis in Moscow. (Fig. i)

The stage design was highly unpretentious – the modest living room of a tiny single apartment, with a sofa, a rug on the wall, a small bookshelf, and a television placed on a stool. This is the home of a woman whose name is never mentioned; she serves as a kind of *Jedermann* (or *Jederfrau*) – an Everyman/Everywoman figure from a medieval morality play. The opening story of the production presents the solitary daily life of this woman in a suburban Moscow school, where she teaches Russian literature and reads her students' essays. She is alone because she lost

both her son and husband in the Nord-Ost hostage crisis – they did not die by the hands of the terrorists but during the so-called ‘special operation’ aimed at freeing the hostages, when gas was released into the theatre auditorium. One of her students has chosen to write about a rarely published chapter of Dostoyevsky’s novel *Demons* where Nikolay Stavrogin rapes a ten-year-old girl who ends up hanging herself as a result, and this sets off another narrative level. The actress takes on all the roles in Dostoevsky’s text – Stavrogin himself, the monk Tikhon, to whom he confesses his crime, and also the little girl, Matryosha.

Although the performance sparked debate on social media, it received unanimous high praise from theatre professionals – specifically for Khamatova’s work, both as an example of acting mastery and as a public statement. Emigration critic Alla Shenderova wrote:

“It is not hard to describe how the ‘rape’ scene is resolved: Chulpan, in a track-suit, embraces and strokes a pillow, then hastily pulls off the pillowcase, revealing an unbearably pink fabric, tosses the pillow onto the bed, roars, strikes the end of the sofa, throws the pillow to the ground, and continues on the floor. There is nothing else – just the pillow, the sofa, and the woman in a grey wig. And yet this scene is so ‘pornographic’ that you want to look away. [...] There will be no catharsis. Tikhon tells Stavrogin that he has not truly repented for his sins and is ready to commit new crimes. ‘Damned psychologist,’ Stavrogin-Khamatova spits out with such fury it’s as if she stabs the monk with a knife. War is the bloody *Post Scriptum* of state life in the past decades.”<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, Latvian critics emphasized the political and spiritual importance of the theme embodied by Khamatova:

“She is Russia as well – more precisely, the nostalgia for a Russia that could be a home, a language, and a homeland, and Russia – an insatiable killer that, without missing a beat, torments its own people both physically and spiritually, covering everything with a new layer of lies, gas, and concrete.”<sup>4</sup>

The actress herself later explained that it was important for her in this performance to understand the nature of violence and evil:

<sup>3</sup> Shenderova (2022).

<sup>4</sup> Adamaite (2022), 10.

“To understand what it means to cross the boundary of humanity, knowing that such a boundary exists. Because at that moment everything was still extremely raw and painful, there were so many parallels. [...] It all so strongly resembled real life at the time. [...] If there hadn’t been the second part of the production, based on Anna Politkovskaya’s investigation of the Nord-Ost crisis, if there hadn’t been the opportunity to look from Matryosha’s – from the victim’s – point of view, I wouldn’t have been able to endure it. Now the two parts kept me in balance.”<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the performance, a text appeared on screen asking the audience not to applaud. “[...] Everything was mixed together: the theme, my departure from Russia, my civic responsibility for what was happening... pain and rage, and the war goes on. It just wasn’t possible,”<sup>6</sup> Khamatova explained. The actress did not come out to bow, and after a long silence, the audience quietly dispersed.

A year later came *Country of the Deaf*. Khamatova performed in Latvian alongside three artists from the New Riga Theatre. This is stage adaptation of Valery Todorovsky’s 1998 feature film, *Country of the Deaf*, is where Khamatova first gained fame as an actress. (Fig. 2)

The performance is stylistically typical of Hermanis’ approach – storytelling that transforms into acting, with characters fully embodied. The plot is well known: two country girls arrive in Moscow and turn to prostitution to make money in pursuit of their dreams.

What makes this version unique, however, is Khamatova’s performance and the deeper message of the piece. Khamatova does not portray the eighteen-year-old Rita at any point. Instead, she plays herself, reflecting on Chulpan Khamatova from thirty years ago, as well as on Russia (and Moscow) in the 1990s. She reflects on her homeland at a crossroads, a country that chose a democratic path in the 1990s. The past, she suggests, is a dream that will never come true – something we now know all too well.

As diaspora critics wrote, Khamatova’s acting – delivered in a new language she was still mastering – allowed the performance to convey a message “[...] of respect for the country that was accepting in

<sup>5</sup> Tišheizere (2025), 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



2. Production of *Country of the Deaf* (2023) at New Riga Theatre. Director Alvis Hermanis. Chulpan Khamatova – Rita, Kristīne Krūze – Yaya. Photo – Jānis Deinats

a difficult point in life, and of successful integration – entering this new environment.”<sup>7</sup>

Looking back on this first role performed in Latvian, Khamatova emphasizes that her professional approach is changing; she is using different acting skills:

“I actually think that, in the acting profession, the main means of expression is not language. It’s inner action – what I want to achieve with my partners, with myself, with the audience, with the play. [...] When performing in a foreign language, I have to act. I don’t feel the subtlest nuances when acting in English, German, or Latvian, so language becomes... a supplement – not an embellishment, but... yes, a component of action. And not the most important one.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Vinogradova (2024).

<sup>8</sup> Tišheizere (2025), 40.



2. Production of *Country of the Deaf* (2023) at New Riga Theatre. Director Alvis Hermanis. Chulpan Khamatova – Rita. Photo – Jānis Deinats

Body language, movement, and internal action are even more dominant in Khamatova's most recent performance – *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk, directed by Ola Mafaalani at the Dailes Theatre. As Polish theatre critic Tomasz Domogala writes, Syrian-born Dutch director Ola Mafaalani has created a production whose key is “[...] the construction of the figure of Mother/Nature, and with it its symbolic kingdom – the Forest, which is something like the infinite space of the eternal natural order of the world or, even more broadly, the cosmos.”<sup>9</sup>

Khamatova plays the lead role – the teacher Janina Duszejko – and serves as the main bearer of the performance's message: the hand of Nature or Fate, punishing those who have rebelled against Mother Nature,

<sup>9</sup> Domogala, Tomaš (2025). *Vizīte Kłodzas Eleisīnā*. teatravestnesis.lv, 18 Jun.



3. Production of Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead* (2025) at Latvian Daile theatre. Director Ola Mafaalani. Chulpan Khamatova – Janina.

Photo – Marko Rass

violated her, or squandered her gifts. Over the course of the performance, Khamatova repeatedly transforms her stage presence – at moments becoming a kind of 'centaur,' that is, a human with animal traits. At times, she embodies her beloved dogs, shot by hunters; at others, the deer that have fallen victim to them. (Fig. 3)

Reflecting on the production, Khamatova states that culture and art must convey a certain message:

“[...] we are a mere flash on Earth, we've been given the privilege to be born, to live a life, and then that's it. The end. How can we learn to understand that in time? So that we don't regret in the last moment that we lived too little, loved too little, rejoiced, danced, read poetry too little. How to reach the awareness

that in every second of life there must be joy and love? Love for oneself, for others, for nature – care for it. Because, unfortunately, modern life denies all of this.”<sup>10</sup>

Khamatova has become part of today’s theater landscape in Latvia. However, this did not come easy. When the show *Country of the Deaf* begins, Khamatova enters the space, takes her seat, and begins to speak silently – her language unintelligible to the audience. After a moment, with clear effort, she starts to pronounce words. The difficulty she experiences is not due to speaking a foreign language but stems from a deeper struggle – a struggle with her own state of mind and identity. She had to undergo a profound transformation to regain her voice in a completely different country, context, and cultural landscape. The price of this transformation is extraordinarily high, and Khamatova has paid it.

Since 2023, Khamatova’s brother, **Shamil Khamatov** (b. 1985), has also been performing at the Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre. In just three seasons, he has become one of the theatre’s leading actors, playing crucial roles in its most socially and politically significant productions.

It is worth noting that, following Russia’s aggression, the Chekhov Theatre has firmly positioned itself within the broader Latvian cultural space. Before each performance, a message is delivered by the theatre’s director, actress Dana Bjorka, condemning the war, expressing solidarity with Ukraine, and calling on Latvian society not to divide along national lines but to unite around shared human values. In recent years, the Chekhov Theatre has welcomed into its troupe actors who have emigrated from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Each season is centered around a pressing social and political theme – among them, power and violence.

This theme has been explored in several productions. In *Hamlet* (2023), directed by Viesturs Kairišs, Shakespeare’s tragedy is staged as a parable about Russia a warmonger. The action takes place in the underground bunker of Claudius – renamed Klavdin – where blood continuously runs down the walls. Khamatov plays Klavdin’s aide, Polonin,

<sup>10</sup> Tišheizere (2025), 40.



4. Production of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (2023) at Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre. Director Viesturs Kairišs. Shamil Khamatov (from left) – Polonin, Alexandr Malikov – Klavdin. Photo – Inese Kalniņa

who routinely dispatches camouflaged servants to scrub the bloodstained walls. Polonin is a satirical figure, a grey eminence who steers the country toward catastrophe, ultimately leading to the downfall of both himself and his puppet Klavdin. (Fig. 4)

At the end of the same season, Khamatov played the pivotal role of the artist Chartkov in Gogol's *The Portrait*, directed by Yuri Butusov. In this production, there are several Chartkovs – the play is staged as a collective, perpetual dream shared by many characters, who briefly awaken at times, only to transform into other figures. The climax of the production occurs in a scene where Shamil Khamatov's Devil's butler lists the daily schedule to Chertkov, played by Dmitry Yegorov at that moment. The schedule includes a light breakfast, followed by reflections on the identity of the leader and the nation, lunch with the 'uncorking' of virgins, then breathing exercises where the leader sighs in his office, while the provinces are whipped into a hurricane. And so on, up until ideas of deification of the



5. Production of Ester Bol's *Gogol. The Portrait* (2024) at Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre. Director Yurij Butusov. Shamil Khamatov – Chartkov. Photo – Kristaps Kalns

leader and expansion of the homeland. Khamatov's character, dressed in a brocade business suit, delivers this schedule with a performance on a table that blends offensive judo-like gestures with ceremonial bowing.

At the end of the performance, Khamatov once again transforms into an aged Chartkov. The senile old man wants at last to rid himself of the devil's grip and destroy the demonic portrait. But it turns out that his prayers are in vain – God does not accept his good intentions, and the only thing Chartkov is still capable of is ruining yet another person. (Fig. 5)

Reflecting on *Hamlet* and *The Portrait*, Khamatov reveals that, in both productions, his characters carried an important political message, one that he personally supports. However, the monologue about power in Gogol's *The Portrait* was incomparably sharper, as “*Hamlet* had an element of irony or sarcasm, and humor relieves the weight of the theme.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Khamatov (2024).

Together with colleagues Evgeny Pronin, Konstantin Nikulin (Russia), Ivan Strelcov (Belarus), and Volodimir Goreslavets (Ukraine), Khamatov continues to integrate into Latvia's cultural landscape and contributes to the integration of a society divided by the current political climate.

### Directors – Loss, Trauma, and the Analysis of Evil

In the spring of 2024, a premiere took place at the Latvian National Theatre: a production by director **Dmitry Krymov** (b. 1954), based on his own score: *Peter Pan. Syndrome*. This production was highly anticipated, but even before the opening night, there were many contradictory opinions. Krymov's name was well known among theater professionals, but, to the average theatergoer, it meant little. On social media, some people questioned what this Russian director, who had fled his country, was doing on our main stage. "What can he possibly show us?" they asked. The prevailing demand seemed to be: "Show us your strong political stance against Putin's criminal regime."

For those familiar with Krymov's work, his political position was already clear. Just days before the premiere at the National Theatre, Krymov's recorded production of *Kostya* premiered in Rīga's main cinema. *Kostya* is a work with an unmistakable anti-war message, condemning the militarization of Russia and its people.

Had Krymov chosen to stage something with a similar political or social message, the audience's reaction might have been more understanding, more receptive, even more tolerant. But he didn't. Instead, Krymov chose to stage a deeply personal story about himself – about his exhaustion, and the emptiness he feels without his native culture.

Krymov admitted that he had never read the original *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie. For him, both Peter Pan and the fairy Tinker Bell were simply symbols representing individuals who refuse to grow up, who resist living an ordinary life devoid of miracle and wonder.

The world of aging, or perhaps eternal, Peter Pan is, in Krymov's vision, the theater itself. The performance does not conceal its overtly theatrical



6. Production of *Peter Pan. The Syndrome* (2024) at Latvian National theatre. Director Dmitry Krymov. Photo – Girts Ragelis

nature – Peter Pan and Tinker Bell make their entrance by crawling down from the first balcony's box. On stage, there is a girl's bedroom that the stagehands can move into the background. These stagehands are guided by Rainis, a celebrated Latvian poet and former director of the theater. Rainis, along with Mikhail Chekhov, are cast as two of the Lost Boys from Neverland. Now, Peter and the equally aging Tinker Bell summon the Lost Boys and Girls to show a miracle to the little girl.

This miracle, however, is Pushkin – his poetry and his death after a duel with Dantes in a snowfall. The duel is repeated twice: first as a tragic event, and when the young girl begins to cry, it is shown again as a farce where anything can be used to shoot – brooms, clarinets – and the wounded body parts either explode or remain in the hands of the wounded like a toy. The duel is the central scene of the performance. It is staged in an extremely poetic and beautiful way. (Fig. 6)



6. Production of *Peter Pen. The Syndrome* (2024) at Latvian National theatre. Director Dmitry Krymov. Photo – Girts Raģelis

But it is also the most problematic scene. The director seems not to have fully considered that the phrase '*Pushkin – eto nashe vsio*' (Pushkin is our everything) holds meaning only within the Russian cultural space. This production, however, is staged in a different country, within a different cultural context, where different symbols and cultural codes apply.

Only in the final scene of the performance, when old film footage appears showing a long-deceased friend celebrating his birthday back in 1987, and in his honor Édith Piaf sings her famous lines *Non, rien de rien. Non, je ne regrette rien*, does the audience come together. As Marina Nasardinova, theatre critic for the Russian-language Latvian press, writes:

“The audience ceases to be divided between those for whom it was almost unbearable to see Pushkin on stage and hear his poetry in Russian, and those for whom it was almost unbearable to feel that heavy, suffocating tension hanging in the air and to witness how Pushkin, caught in the crossfire, falls into pieces [...] The meaninglessness of hope and the horror of the abyss – that is the price of the audience’s unity.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Nasardinova (2024).



7. Production of *Notes of Madmen* (2024), produced by Art Forte.  
Chulpan Khamatova. Photo – Art Forte

Krymov is reflecting on his own pain and losses, but for the audience, the comparison inevitably brings them face to face with the current political situation and the collective pain and losses endured by the people of Ukraine. And these losses have been caused by the state that operates in the name of Russian culture and the so-called Russian world. This comparison was particularly difficult for the audience at the Latvian National Theatre.

The Latvian vs. Russian audiences were even more profoundly divided by *Notes of Madmen* (2024), produced by Art Forte, staged in Rīga but primarily aimed at the global Russian diaspora, featuring Chulpan Khamatova and Maxim Sukhanov (Berlin). The text – co-written by the actors and directors – was a reflection on the life of actors in exile. One of them, Sukhanov, was a man destroyed by depression, revived only through conversations with the actress played by Khamatova. (Fig. 7) She appeared at times dressed as a ladybug, at others as a cactus, clearly returned from some demeaning job. It was evident that the performance was first and foremost meant for the Russian émigré audience around the world.

However, it was staged in Latvia, and Rīga's architecture was visible in the production design – a projection showed a neglected apartment and the view from its window; the actors were seen both in videos filmed in this apartment and live in the foreground of the stage, having 'emerged' from it. The unmistakable link to Latvia here caused both confusion – because Khamatova had performed important roles in Latvia, far from anything like a ladybug – and protest, especially when SS officers knock on the apartment door of the exiles, who feel like Anne Frank in her hideout. None of these talented and relatively well-off individuals are a young Jewish girl, and in Latvia they are not threatened by the so-called 'SS men', i. e., the former legionnaires often mentioned by Russian propaganda, who are now nearly a hundred years old.

The production received a far more positive reception from critics in the diaspora: "From the ashes of memory, a new world can be built – if one tries hard enough"<sup>13</sup>; "All of Krymov's theatre is about missed opportunities, unfulfilled hopes, and flashes of passion"<sup>14</sup>. The most direct expression of the overall sentiment came from Sergey Nikolaevich:

"In actuality, émigré life teaches you humility. The most important thing is to keep your cool and to avoid cutting off emotional ties with the outside world. Do not isolate yourself in your fears, resentments, and sorrows. Do not constantly look back in longing. That, though, may be the hardest part. We are made of our past – of the tears and the dreams, of accidental slips of the tongue and memories. What to do with them? Where to hide them? How to live with all of it? In *Notes of Madmen*, Krymov offers the only option he sees: to replay them over and over. And perhaps, this way, we can eventually say goodbye to them."<sup>15</sup>

However, even the diaspora press pointed out the ethical imbalance in Krymov's production:

"As emigrants, they are exceptionally successful. Both work with renowned directors: Khamatova – with Alvis Hermanis, and Marina Davydova and Sukhanov – with Maxim Didenko. Both draw large audiences. [...] Meanwhile, a

<sup>13</sup> Smorodinova (2024).

<sup>14</sup> Agisheva (2024).

<sup>15</sup> Nikolaevich (2024).

vast number of émigré artists are deprived of the opportunity to practice their profession, and their compatriots in Russia face censorship and persecution. Therefore, when Krymov presents Khamatova and Sukhanov as examples of destitute artists – it causes confusion.”<sup>16</sup>

In a sense, **Yuriy Butusov** (b. 1961) chose the opposite path when staging Esther Bol’s play *Gogol. The Portrait* at the Chekhov Theatre – not as a survival of trauma, but as a stark analysis of how and under what conditions totalitarian obedience and the rejection of critical thinking can develop in a society. Bol’s play questions the values and characters depicted in Nikolai Gogol’s short story *The Portrait*. This Faustian parable tells the tale of a soul sold to the Devil in exchange for immediate fame and wealth. However, in Bol’s version, the artist Chertkov sells his soul not for grand artistic achievement but for mundane fame. For Bol (the pseudonym of the well-known Russian playwright Asya Voloshin) and director Butusov, this trade signifies not only the maiming and death of the soul, but also the destruction of art itself.

The show opens with a long, sensual scene in which someone is cooking borscht. “And the horilka, which you drink between the first and second spoonful of fiery borscht, must be so icy that the frost remains on your fingers from the glass,” says the Teacher, played by Volodymyr Goreslavets, comparing the painter’s sense of connecting colors to the process of cooking borscht. At one point, the actor switches to his native Ukrainian language, making the gastronomic details even more sensual, until the audience is nearly salivating.

The production is reminiscent of Butusov’s other stagings – it is deeply sensual. The sensuality is palpable right down to the real sweat on the actors’ foreheads as they push, pull, and kick heavy stage decorations, or as a woman slowly unties the strings of her corset. This physicality is seamlessly embedded with the text, which demands the audience’s careful attention, as it often offers contradictory or paradoxical information. The words play with the visuals, the music, the changing lights, and even the most mundane objects are imbued with hellish significance. Butusov admits that he was

<sup>16</sup> Hitrov (2024).



8. Production of Ester Bol's *Gogol. The Portrait* (2024) at Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre. Director Yurij Butusov. Shamil Khamatov – Chartkov, Volodimir Goreslavets – Teacher. Photo – Kristaps Kalns

influenced by the aesthetics of Eimuntas Nekrošius. Indeed, the production bears a certain hypnotic allure similar to Nekrošius' performances (perhaps also because the scenographer is Nekrošius' son, Marius). However, these moments of deep immersion are occasionally interrupted by Brechtian techniques that shake up the audience, such as when one actor announces the title of the next scene. Actors shift between roles like changing masks, and the lead character is portrayed by several different actors throughout the play. Actually, Gogol's *The Portrait* serves as a stepping stone for the play and the production, but the core focus is not on the act of selling the soul. Rather, it is on the obligations and consequences that follow the transaction.

Butusov held a kind of pre-rehearsal casting, selecting artists based on mutual understanding rather than their national or state affiliations. However, with two exceptions, all the cast members, like Butusov himself, are from Russia, Ukraine, or Belarus, and most have come to Latvia due to the war. As a result, every word of the play, every scene, carries a much deeper, more personal significance for them than it might for the audience in the theater, who may be comparing what they see on stage to their own distant experiences and sympathies.

In the final scene, Ukrainian artist Volodymyr Goreslavets, as the Teacher, feeds borscht to Shamil Khamatov portraying Chertkov, who writhes before him in convulsions – or perhaps in the agony of abstinence. (Fig. 8)

There is a lot of cruelty, demolition, and destruction on the stage. But there is also a very important message both for the audience and artists: Art could be the very last territory where humanity and tolerance, and reconciliation are still possible.

### Instead of Conclusion

Reflecting on artists in exile, Edward Said observed the following:

“There is the sheer fact of isolation and displacement, which produces the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation, and community. At this extreme the exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments. [...] The exile is offered a new set of affiliations and develops new loyalties. But there is also a loss – of critical perspective, of intellectual reserve, of moral courage.”<sup>17</sup>

War and uncertainty about the future are not the most fertile ground for artistic creation. These factors affect artists even more deeply when they find themselves in a completely different and unfamiliar cultural situation. Each of them, in their own way, tries to find their footing in order to continue or restart their professional path, to answer the question of what matters most: preserving their national and cultural identity, adapting

<sup>17</sup> Said (2003), 183.

to the realities of another country and its public values, or seeking some middle ground – a compromise, a synthesis of different possibilities. No single answer is possible.

Looking at how artists who have left their homeland due to political beliefs attempt to preserve their profession and their ability to express themselves publicly, it becomes apparent that actors, whose work is tied to a specific theatre, tend to be more flexible and integrate more successfully into a new cultural space, absorbing and transmitting new cultural codes. Chulpan and Shamil Khamatov have chosen the latter path.

The work of the aforementioned directors, on the other hand, demonstrates a greater degree of artistic freedom. However, it can also reflect disorientation – a turning inward toward personal pain and problems, while overlooking both the direct cause of exile – Russia's full-scale war against a sovereign neighboring country, Ukraine – and the context of the host country's cultural space, as in the case of the talented and internationally acclaimed director Dmitry Krymov.

Paradoxically, it is sometimes the most progressive artists – those most welcomed and embraced by the Western cultural space – like Dmitry Krymov, who most clearly display the kind of superiority of Russian cultural and opinion that “[...] the whole occupied area called the Soviet Union” still is “a place where each corner was destined to welcome Russian language and culture”<sup>18</sup>. Such an attitude has been widely analyzed in postcolonial studies, and directly leads back to imperialist thinking.

However, there is another way of speaking about the past, the present, and of gaining insight for a possible future – by analyzing societal beliefs and morality, exploring mechanisms of violence and submission, and investigating the possibilities for their degradation or even deconstruction, as addressed in Yuriy Butusov's production.

Translated by Kristīna Guste

<sup>18</sup> Annus (2012), 24.

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Įveikti traumą ar ją įsisąmoninti ir išsaugoti.  
Iš Rusijos emigravę menininkai Latvijoje

*Santrauka*

2022 m. vasario 24 d. buvo lūžio taškas, po kurio tapo būtina radikalai iš naujo įvertinti ankstesnes vertybes, santykius, vystymosi kelius ir visą kultūrinį kontekstą. Baltijos šalys, ypač Latvija, nuo to laiko tapo centru, kuriame vyksta reikšmingi visuomenės nuomonės apie Rusiją, jos kultūrą ir kultūrinį paveldą pokyčiai. Taip pat iš naujo vertinamos šiuolaikinės Rusijos kultūros asmenybės. Bet koks Latvijos menininkų ir jų kolegų emigravusių rusų bendradarbiavimas dažnai vertinamas kaip politinis veiksmas, net jei nebuvo toks ketinimas.

Šis straipsnis skirtas Latvijoje gyvenančių iš Rusijos emigragravusių menininkų – režisierių Dmitrijaus Krymovo ir Jurijaus Butusovo, aktorių Chulpan Chamatovos, Shamil Chamatovo ir kitų – kūrinių analizei, atsižvelgiant į jų politines pozicijas, pareiškimus ir integraciją į Latvijos kultūrinę erdvę. Straipsnio nereikėtų laikyti išsamiu tyrimu, paremtu konkretais teoriniais rémais ar paradigmomis, o veikiau savotišku „lauko tyrimu“, kuriame renkami ir interpretuojami atskiri faktai, nepretenduojant į platesnius apibendrinimus.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: emigracija iš Rusijos, kalba, tapatybė, integracija