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Baltic theater festivals in the 1990s as agents of change

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ABSTRACT

This article explores international theater festivals in three Baltic countries – Baltoscandal in Estonia, LIFE in Lithuania, and Homo Novus in Latvia – as agents of change and internationalization within the performing arts field in the 1990s. A comparative analysis of the titles, intentions, programs, and leading personalities reveals that festivalizing processes have determined not only the development and perception of theater and performance culture, but also wider processes in cultural policy in the respective countries. Willmar Sauter's theory of the theatrical event and Dragan Klaić's research on festivals form the theoretical background of this article.


KEYWORDS Festival; Baltic countries; Baltoscandal; LIFE; Homo Novus; theater; performing arts

One of the important aspects of the transition period of the late 1980s and 1990s was the rise in international interest in post-Soviet cultures, which was in sync with the wishes of the transitional cultures, to re-contextualize themselves within a wider (predominantly western) cultural realm. Emerging theater festivals in the three Baltic countries – Baltoscandal was established in 1990 in Estonia, LIFE in 1993 in Lithuania, and Homo Novus in 1995 in Latvia – played a crucial, yet under researched role as agents of change and internationalization within the field of performing arts.

This research analyzes the aesthetic and political functions of these theater festivals, revealing their impact on the democratization of the perception of theater in the Baltic countries. As temporary platforms of intense artistic experience, these festivals introduced new aesthetics and different production models to local artistic communities, critics, and audiences. Their organizers developed long-term strategies for international collaboration that gradually became an integral part of the 'new theater' of the Baltics. As Vicki Ann Cremona (2007), 5–6) notes,

A festival is a public event that is inserted into a particular cultural context which bestows upon it the qualities by which it is perceived and identified. [...] The relationship between the type of playing culture that contributes to the creation of the event and the cultural context into which it is inserted is fundamental to the festivalising process itself.

'Festivalizing' is a term introduced by the research group of the International Federation for Theatre Research to explore the notion of the theatrical event and apply it to 'the current

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international growth of and interest in festivals and festival culture' (Martin 2007, 1), which is manifested in the growing number of festivals all around the world. Swedish theater researcher Willmar Sauter (2007b, 205) described a theatrical event 'as an interwoven relationship between cultural context, contextual theatricality, theatrical playing and playing culture,' the latter being opposed to writing culture, focused on the here and now experience and uniting 'the performer and the spectator as two indispensable partners of the Theatrical Event' (Sauter 2004, 4). The festival is seen as 'a meta-event encompassing a series of single events that are linked by various factors' (Cremona 2007, 6).

Using the theatrical event model comprising the four basic aspects proposed by Willmar Sauter as a structuring principle, this article will compare the Baltic theater festival programs and organizations, their resonance within the specific communities and their impact on the development of theater in each country during their initial phase in the 1990s. Sauter draws attention to the fact that not only are the four aspects of cultural context, contextual theatricality, theatrical playing, and playing culture important, but also the links between them and 'the transformation of *values* that characterizes the four elements as they move from one point to another' (Sauter 2007a, 23). Even if the cultural context – the socio-political environment at the reviewed historical moment in three Baltic countries – was similar, the theater festivals took different shapes and served diverse aims corresponding to the intentions and values of their organizers. Sauter defines this as contextual theatricality. In turn, the organizers were largely affected by the specific playing culture of the local environment, being part of it and at the same time trying to overcome and change its traditions and values. Finally, the aspect of theatrical playing or the here-and-now experience gained through 'the actual encounter between performer and spectator,' also defined as a 'communicative process' (22), is important for exploring how these festivals not only reflected, but also projected the understanding of, and approaches to, theater that were characteristic of each of the performing arts communities. In this article, the focus is on the first period of the biannual festivals Baltoscandal (1990–2002) and Homo Novus (1995–2003), and the whole cycle of LIFE (1993–2000).

Several sources have been examined, including festival programs, articles, publications, interviews, and other research focused on these festivals. A comparative analysis of the collected information is combined with an evaluation of the role and impact of festivals on the further development of the theater scene in the Baltic countries, based on critical articles and reviews. Willmar Sauter's theory of the theatrical event and Dragan Klaic's research on festivals form the main theoretical background for this article.

Cultural context, definition, and functions of festivals

According to Willmar Sauter's theatrical event model, the cultural context includes the cultural, political, and social worlds, that is the socio-political environment (Sauter 2007a, 20) in which festivals evolve and by which they are affected. Theater festivals that emerged in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union can be defined as temporary platforms for celebrating new theater and generating the future of theater by inserting new practices and different aesthetics into the framework of theater cultures which were uniquely challenged. At the beginning of the 1990s, major political, economic, social, and ideological changes took place in the Baltic countries and theater lost its significance for a while. Its previous role as a public forum of resistance against the Soviet regime, where people could share hidden messages transmitted by theater

artists using Aesopian language was gone. Instead, the introduction of a market economy figuratively 'turned theater institutions into business enterprises and spectators into consumers' (Kreicberga 2021, 79). Even if formally public theaters retained their status, significant reforms in cultural policy were not introduced. In terms of attitude and values, they forcibly became product manufacturers responsible for balancing decreasing public subsidies with their own income. At the same time, regained independence introduced different freedoms and possibilities that encouraged the emergence of an independent theater scene which was looking for alternatives, both in terms of production modes and theater aesthetics. Many Baltic theater scholars would agree with the Estonian theater critic Jaak Rähesoo's (1999, 71) explanation: 'Theater as a public art, in particular, had to re-think its role: for years a channel for expressing, however allusively, opposition to Soviet rule, it now had to obtain a new function.' New functions were researched and tested at theater festivals. Theorizing festivals as theatrical events, Willmar Sauter (2007a), 18–19) wrote,

A theatrical event is not only the encounter between a performance and its audience in a given place at a certain time but includes also the complexities of the society in which it takes place. A theatrical event does not happen in a vacuum, but is closely related to such factors as aesthetics, the economy, education, attitudes, status, traditions, etc.

During the post-Soviet transition period, emerging festivals did more than embrace the complexities of their respective societies: they worked to create a temporary society of the festival that was able to critically reflect on and remodel these complexities by suggesting alternative operating models. This was possible because of the specific character of a festival as a (theatrical) event, which entails the intense experience of performative practices that build a (new type of) community outside of conventional institutional frames. The theater scholar Dragan Klaic (2014, 29) characterizes the role of 'new festival initiatives that throughout the 1990s changed the festival map of Europe:'

Festivals were created to celebrate the newly discovered freedoms, the joy of spontaneous sociability, the stunning diversity of cultural ideas, plans and aspirations, the spirit of dialogue, and even more of debate and polemic, the confrontation with previously unknown artistic forms, aesthetic choices, and manners of communication.

Theater festivals perform a variety of functions within different areas. For the artistic community involved in festivals as participants or spectators, they are sources for new artistic impulses, ways to educate themselves, to meet like-minded people, to contextualize the artistic practice, to start international collaborations, and to enter new markets. Organizers and producers also contextualize and internationalize their practices; they gain new collaborations and new markets, develop professionally, learn new production skills and models, and build their intercultural competence. For audiences, festivals play a crucial role in having new artistic experiences, broadening the understanding of art and culture, and practicing tolerance for different cultures. Critics and researchers find a common artistic experience for further reflection. At the level of cultural policy and in politics in general, festivals help to represent and contextualize the national culture, to strengthen the image of the national culture, the state, or the city within a global context, to develop tourism, and to exercise soft power. The political potential of festivals is often overlooked. Nevertheless, as Klaic (2014), 32–33) notes,

Festivals – at least some festivals – function as strongholds of resistance to the standardising pressures of globalisation, as cultural interventions that seek to reinforce the specificity of a local

place and establish their relationships with the world on their own terms, by nurturing co-operative ties with artists who share their critical stance and their rejection of readymade, stereotypical and standardized cultural commodities. Those festivals function not in a compensating and representational mode but in a developmental way, seeking to affirm specific artistic strategies and interests and to induce local developments with allies and collaborators brought in from elsewhere. In their best moments, such festivals articulate a productive dialectic of local and global.

The three Baltic theater festivals under discussion here certainly performed their roles in a developmental mode. Despite the seemingly similar cultural contexts of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, however, the three festivals developed in noticeably distinctive ways. These differences stemmed from the specific aspects of playing culture, contextual theatricality, and theatrical playing in each country.

Playing culture and contextual theatricality as framing aspects of festivals

In his article 'The values of the festival – the Swedish Theatre Biennale,' Willmar Sauter (2007b, 215) illustrates the four basic aspects of the theatrical event model using the more commonplace concepts of politics (cultural context), management or organization (contextual theatricality), performances or experience (theatrical playing), and (local) environment (playing culture). The local environment or playing culture could be interpreted as a theatrical tradition and conventions, as well as other forms of playing 'through which a society communicates its value system' and which 'contains typically strong physical elements, which have to be learned by doing' (Sauter 2007a, 19). The playing culture was the focus of the Baltic theater festivals' reevaluation of dominant existing theater-making approaches and the introduction of new ones to local artistic communities, critics, and general audiences, as well as their attempts to offer remarkable theatrical and visual interventions and celebrations of a different character to the former Soviet festivities. In case of the Baltic festivals, contextual theatricality, characterized by Sauter (2007a, 21) as 'conditions, under which a theatrical event takes place' or as management or organization, was closely connected with the playing culture because the festivals were driven by the wish to revive it.

During the Soviet occupation of the Baltic countries the method of psychological realism based on Stanislavski's system prevailed in theater education and practice and was postulated as the only true and eligible approach.¹ Nevertheless, each of the playing cultures maintained its specific qualities inherited from previous times, and developed its own approaches formed by the specifics of national cultures, education systems, and accepted values. For instance, the American theater researcher Jeff Johnson (2007, ix) explicitly shows the differences between playing cultures of the Baltic countries in the titles of the parts of his book *The New Theater of the Baltics*: 'Lithuania: Catholic Spectacle – Directors' Theater,' 'Estonia: The Lutheran Narrative – Writers' Theater,' and 'Latvia: Focus on Process – Actors' Theater.' Even if the attempt to generalize may seem simplistic and disputable, it helps to acknowledge unique tendencies and characteristics of each playing culture in comparison to the others.

The Baltic theater festivals were envisioned and created by strong and curious artistic personalities and their associates who were interested in the development and change of the theater landscape itself and strove to contextualize it within Western theater and performance culture. Vicki Ann Cremona (2007, 7) emphasizes that the artistic director is

fundamental to the festivalizing process, since 'his/her input may effectively mark not only the selection and choice of performances, but also the way they are shown, as well as establish the ways they are to be apprehended.'

The founder and artistic director of the first international theater festival in the Baltic countries, Baltoscandal, which took place in 1990 in Pärnu, in the middle of the transition period when Estonia had not yet officially restored its independence, was the 29-year-old theater creator Peeter Jalakas (born 1961), with his theater company Ruto Killakund (established in 1989). At the end of the 1980s, Jalakas spent two years studying abroad in Germany and Denmark, where he learnt about theater anthropology from Eugenio Barba at the Odin Teatret. Jalakas told Barba: 'it was all very good, but I can't imagine how I'm going to do this thing in Estonia now' (Toms 2018, 13–14). Inspired by his experience abroad, Jalakas envisioned a different theater from what existed in Estonia at that time. Jalakas' artistic interests, which explain the basic principles of the Baltoscandal festival, are well described characterizing his company, Ruto Killakund, on the Von KrahI Theater website,

The actions and mentality of Ruto Killakund was formed by introspectiveness – the actor's creation was thoroughly based on his or her self, text and choreography. The company used materialistic minimalism as an aesthetic principle rather than a necessity brought on by lack of funding. Its main components were movement, music and bits of text. [...] Another part of Ruto's activities was dealing with the expressiveness of the theater. This applied to most outdoor performances – shows, fireworks, carnivals (Von KrahI Theater n.d.).²

The festival was driven by the aim of changing and diversifying the understanding of theater and ways of creating theater in Estonia (Toms 2018, 14). The main principles promoted by Jalakas were:

- The festival first and foremost is a gathering of creators; artists are required to be present during the whole festival, to see each other's performances, to participate in discussions and to communicate with each other.
- The presented performances should be different from the mainstream Estonian theater, broadening the notion of the theater for theater producers, critics, and audiences.
- The performances should not be translated, as the message of performances should be clear without understanding the text (Toms 2018, 16).

The first two festivals of Baltoscandal in 1990 and 1992 took place in Pärnu at the same time as the jazz festival Fiesta International. It was a conscious choice of the artistic director Peeter Jalakas to use the framework of the successful music festival (established in 1986), which complemented the free and friendly atmosphere of Baltoscandal and facilitated the organization (Toms 2018, 14). The first two festivals were organized by Jalakas' company Ruto Killakund in partnership with the city of Pärnu, the state supported Endla Theater and Fiesta Management, and with support from the Estonian Folk Culture Development Center and the Ministry of Culture. When, in 1994, Jalakas was appointed as the artistic director of the Rakvere Theater, it became the legal organizer of the festival, which moved to Rakvere, where it resides to this day.

The founder of the Lithuanian International Theater Festival LIFE, which took place a few years after the restoration of the democratic republic in Vilnius in 1993, was the theater critic and managing director of the Vilnius Youth Theater (since 1989) Rūta

Vanagaitė (born 1955), who at the age of 38 promoted the career of the famous Lithuanian director Eimuntas Nekrošius. In 1991, she organized a large tour of Nekrošius' productions across the United States, returning to Vilnius with influential contacts and ideas to reform the theater system in Lithuania. She disrupted the traditional repertory system at the Youth Theater by announcing 'a hundred-day moratorium,' thereby freezing the assembly line nature of traditional theater practice. Instead, she hosted rehearsals of several productions, and initiated the International Theater Festival LIFE, starting preparations in the fall of 1991. As Rūta Oginskaitė (2018) notes, 'The co-authors of the LIFE idea were American producers, the co-founders of the International Theater Festival of Chicago, Bernard and Jane Sahlins.' The advice and involvement of the American producers helped Vanagaitė to push the idea of the festival and to attract the attention of the authorities and private sponsors. The caliber of the American trustees presumably influenced the general principles of the festival:

- The festival program consisted of two parts: 'a celebration as a gift to the country and the city (opening and closing carnivals), and the festival program itself' (Borkovskis 2013), which featured internationally acclaimed directors and companies.
- The festival management was established as an independent foundation with the permanent administration residing in an upscale location to curate the program and to attract donors.
- In 1993–1998 the festival also functioned as a producer and touring manager of the new work of Eimuntas Nekrošius.

Unlike Baltoscandal, which was advertised in the media only briefly before the festival, LIFE's was advertised for almost two years, since its founder, Rūta Vanagaitė, established an independent nonprofit foundation in 1991. Her team operated from its headquarters in the center of Vilnius and her ambitions were high. Vanagaitė had learned from her mentor, the American producer Bernard Sahlins, that 'people need to see that you live chic, and then they believe you can do more' (Oginskaitė 2013). The festival became a forerunner in Lithuania in many areas: attracting sponsors for a cultural event, involving volunteers, and running a cultural event on business principles (a ticket to a performance cost around \$10, which was a very high price in the 1990s). Unlike Baltoscandal and Homo Novus, which always included the productions of local artists in their programs, LIFE was mainly focused on foreign productions, except for some Lithuanian directing highlights.

The film and theater director Pēteris Krilovs (born 1949) was 46 years old and the artistic director (1994–1996) of the Daugavpils Theater when, in 1995, he established the international festival of contemporary theater Homo Novus in remote Daugavpils, the second largest city in Latvia, with a majority Russian-speaking population. Krilovs had built his reputation as a renowned theater pedagogue after training two groups of acting students for the Daugavpils Theater in circumstances approximating a theater laboratory in 1988–1993. The Daugavpils Theater was established as a state theater in 1988 to strengthen the presence of Latvian culture in the Latgale region. In a few years' time, the enthusiastic work of the teachers and students involved made the Daugavpils Theater, and especially Krilovs' productions, a professional success and characterized by theater critics as an 'updated theatre language' (Radzobe 2007, 509–510). Innovation was implicit in

Krilovs' productions, which gave fresh interpretations to texts staged for the first time in Latvia, new feelings of truthfulness in acting, and coherently mixed different theater languages. By the mid-1990s, these innovations had become characteristic of the new generation of theater makers, most of whom were Krilovs' former students. 'This allows us to conclude that the new theater of the new Latvia was born in Daugavpils in 1991,' stated Radzobe (2007, 510).

Acknowledging that a new playing culture different from mainstream Latvian theater was erupting not only in his own pedagogical practice, but also in other acting training studios around the same time, Krilovs together with Baiba Tjarve, theater researcher, manager, and the literary advisor at the Daugavpils Theater, decided to organize an international students and young actors' festival with the aim of exploring the future of theater in the neighboring countries. They managed to organize a great theatrical event and a true celebration for the entire younger generation of theater makers. Krilovs' interest in theater pedagogy and his close connection to the younger generation of theater artists shaped the goals of the first festival:

- The festival is a platform of exchange and discussion on the future of theater among all involved parties.
- The driving force of the festival is curiosity and openness toward new forms and approaches in theater production that are also shared during the workshops.
- The festival is a celebration of theater with a lot of discussions, informal events, and parties.

The first *Homo Novus* in Daugavpils has become a legend as it gathered the whole younger generation of actors, directors, scenographers, and theater critics, many of whom were also involved in the organization of the festival as volunteers. In 1996, Krilovs and Tjarve left their positions at the Daugavpils Theater and moved to Riga. Nevertheless, the idea of an international festival was kept alive, and they decided to organize the next version in Riga. It was organized in October 1997 by a group of enthusiasts led by Krilovs and Tjarve with substantial support from the Soros Foundation in Latvia – its subsidiary organization the Performing Arts Information Center became the formal headquarters of the festival. In 1998, the core team of the festival established a non-governmental organization (NGO), the New Theater Institute of Latvia (NTIL), which became the next producer of the festival. *Homo Novus* continued as a biannual event with the goals of introducing the international theater scene to the Latvian audience and exposing the most innovative Latvian performances to an international audience of theater critics and festival organizers.

None of these festivals – in Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia – would have happened without the initiative and drive of Jalakas, Vanagaite, and Krilovs. Without them, the whole landscape of theater in the Baltics would have developed differently. As Dragan Klaic (2014, 37) remarked: 'The centrality of an artistic vision is what gives the festival its specificity, identity and cultural value.' The backgrounds, interests, and personal qualities of the leading figures largely determined not only the understanding of the role of a festival, but also the values that nurtured the further development of the theater scene in the three Baltic countries.

Theatrical playing: communication, audience, program

Wilmar Sauter (2007a), 22–23) describes theatrical playing as the actual encounter between performer and spectator generating a here-and-now experience, which could be interpreted as ‘communicative process through which all the other aspects of the theatrical event concentrate for the time of the performance.’ The always present titles of the festivals are a part of the communicative process, with the audience reflecting the different programming emphasis of the organizers. Baltoscandal is a play on words: it reflects the geographical scope of the Baltic and Scandinavian performances, which was the festival’s initial focus, and it indicates the innovative and provocative aspect of the festival – scandal. LIFE is an abbreviation of ‘Lithuanian Theater FEstival.’ The first version, LiTeF, was close to the title of the famous Yugoslav Theater Festival BiTeF, demonstrating the organizers’ intention to follow existing, successful models of European festivals and to be immediately associated with their tradition. The Latin term *Homo novus* means ‘a new person.’ The initiator and artistic director of this festival, Pēteris Krilovs, described the meaning behind the title: ‘HOMO NOVUS in Latin means – the new, hitherto unknown person. HOMO NOVUS was a contemptuous word for young men of unaristocratic origin that had integrated into the highest society of Ancient Rome. Later it referred to an upstart and nonconformist’ (International Festival of Contemporary Theatre *Homo Novus* 2001). Initially the festival was dedicated to young theater makers and the theater education process, featuring student performances and including workshops and lectures. Later the festival no longer focused on students and the youngest generation, although it always kept an eye on processes and phenomena that could be introduced as new in the context of Latvian theater, and it included an educational program.

A common feature of all three festival programs was the wish to introduce theater and performance trends that were significantly different from the mainstream local theater of the time. Sometimes the same artists appear in two or all three festival programs. In general, however, the festivals offered quite different programs to their audiences depending on the intentions and choices of the artistic leaders of the festivals, as well as on how they defined their audience. The first editions of Baltoscandal and *Homo Novus* were mostly dedicated to artistic communities with the aim to renew and change the respective playing cultures. Only later did these festivals turn to a more general audience to try and broaden understanding of theater and performance. In contrast, LIFE primarily targeted a general audience from the outset, educating the artistic community not only in Lithuania, but also in neighboring countries. Table 1 gives a brief overview of these three festivals.

Baltoscandal: a festival of performance and friendship

In her MA thesis about the Baltoscandal festival, Katarina Tomps (2018, 19) describes its beginnings,

In the early years of Baltoscandal, the preparation of the program was much more creative and random than for today’s festivals. Among the first participants in Baltoscandal were many directors and troupes with whom Peeter Jalakas had become acquainted during his travels. In addition, our close neighbors, Latvians and Lithuanians, have been active participants since the first festivals.

Table 1. Overview of the Baltic theater festivals.

	Baltoscandal	LIFE	Homo Novus
Country	Estonia	Lithuania	Latvia
Place	Pärnu, then Rakvere	Vilnius	Daugavpils, then Riga
Year established	1990	1993	1995
How often	Biannual	Annual	Biannual, later Annual
Founder	Peeter Jalakas (born 1961), at the age of 29, theater maker	Rūta Vanagaitė (born 1955), at the age of 38 theater critic and producer	Pēteris Krilovs (born 1949), at the age of 46, theater and film director and theater pedagogue
Initial focus	Close circles of innovative artists	Admirers of excellence and elite art	Young theater makers
Keyword	Performativity	Chic	New

In the programs there was usually a balance between Estonian theater groups and foreign companies. Estonian theater was mostly represented by independent groups, which were eventually joined by institutional repertory theaters (Endla Theater, Rakvere Theater, Ugala Theater, Estonian Drama Theater, and some others). The theater researcher Jaak Rähesoo (1999), 205–213) in his book *Estonian Theatre* mentions only a few ‘little theaters,’ namely, the Ruto Killakund and Von Krahli theaters (both run by Jalakas), the Children’s Theater of Tartu, the VAT Theater, and Theatrum.³ Around 20 other lesser-known Estonian independent groups performed at Baltoscandal between 1990 and 2002. Being part of an international festival most probably encouraged autonomous theater makers and served as a stimulus to continue working outside the institutional framework.

The first Baltoscandal featured foreign companies from the closest Baltic-Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden) and Russia, as well as Marika Blossfeldt, the New York-based dance and performance artist with Estonian roots who was a regular guest at the festival until 1996. Beginning with the second festival, the geographical scope of invited performances expanded, first adding guests from Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, and then including Belgium, the UK, Poland, Japan, South Korea, and the USA. The main intention of the artistic director was to introduce Estonia to new forms of theater making and performance and to create an event which celebrated freedom of expression and the mutual exchange and friendship of artists. The festival also attempted to make one co-production almost every time. Mentioning even a few guest companies and artists of the first Baltoscandal period reflects the variety of aesthetics presented at the festival: the Ansis Rūtentāls Movement Theater (Latvia), Cantabile 2 (Denmark), Oskaras Koršunovas Theater (Lithuania), Formal Theater (Russia), Teatr Osmego Dnia (Poland), Passage Nord (Norway), Stuffed Puppet Theatre (The Netherlands), Q-teatteri (Finland), Ultima Vez (Belgium), and Thomas Lehmen (Germany). Most performances could be defined as post-dramatic, moving away from the centrality of the spoken dramatic text and toward highlighting other performative means of expression such as movement and the body as well as visual language and space. Today Estonia is the most advanced among the Baltic countries in terms of the diversity and interdisciplinarity of theater and performance, as well as the recognition that the performing arts field receives in cultural policy. To some extent, this is due to the influence of the programming principles of Baltoscandal, especially its atmosphere of equality and exchange that nurtured the wish to advance and integrate theater into a wider framework of performing arts.

LIFE: a festival of celebrities and spectacle

In an interview with Rūta Vanagaitė dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the festival LIFE, Rūta Oginskaitė (2013) described the beginning of the festival as follows,

Everything about LIFE happened for the first time. It was unbelievable that productions by the world's leading artists, e.g. Ingmar Bergman and Peter Brook, were performed in Lithuania. It was equally unexpected and interesting to see the performances of not widely known but internationally acclaimed directors: Simon McBurney's *Crocodile Street* from England, Gabor Zsambek's *Inspector General* from Hungary, Christoph Marthaler's *Kill the European!* from Germany, and Alain Platel's *Bonjour Madame* from Belgium. LIFE introduced not only the European drama theater, but also the hitherto ignored contemporary dance and the new circus.

The LIFE festival immediately gained the image of being an exclusive, must-see event. It was a window to Europe for theater professionals and theater lovers of the post-Soviet era, filling gaps in artistic experience with the names of leading representatives of European theater and performance culture. Besides the aforementioned artists, over the course of time the festival showcased Takeshi Kawamura (Japan), Theodoros Terzopoulos (Greece), Diamanda Gallas (USA), Markus Zohner (Switzerland), *Xarxa* (Spain), Opera Circus (Great Britain), Piotr Mamonov (Russia), Teatr Studio (Poland), Maguy Marin and Victoria Chaplin (France), and Kristian Smeds (Finland), among others. Festivals also featured some Lithuanian productions by the renowned directors Eimuntas Nekrošius, Jonas Vaitkus, Oskaras Koršunovas, and Rimas Tuminas's Icelandic production. In 1993, Eimuntas Nekrošius became the only artist-in-residence of LIFE, and his *Little Tragedies* by Alexander Pushkin (1994), *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov (1995), the second version of Kęstutis Antanėlis's rock opera *Love and Death in Verona* (1996), and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1997) were produced and toured by the festival management. In addition to spectacular opening and closing street performance ceremonies, LIFE also organized educational programs and club events, 'which have served to make the whole festival not only a review of touring theaters, but also a significant cultural phenomenon' (Borkovskis 2013).

The fifth edition of LIFE in 1999 was devoted to the phenomenon of the contemporary circus, which was mostly unknown in the Baltics. Despite Rūta Vanagaitė considering it the best program, 'was most proud of it' (Oginskaitė 2013) and renting large venues for performances, the public was not impressed and it undersold. After this failure, the festival suffered significant losses, and Vanagaitė resigned from her position, declaring that the Lithuanian public was not sufficiently educated (Baltic News Service 2001). The next and final edition of LIFE was in 2000 under the leadership of the actor Tauras Čižas. The Lithuanian Ministry of Culture, however, withdrew its financial support for the festival, fearing that their funding would be used to pay off debts. In 2001, the foundation that organized LIFE was liquidated. Nevertheless, the festival left unprecedented traces in Lithuanian theater and performance culture, as well as introducing new managerial approaches to cultural management. Nowadays, the Lithuanian performing arts scene hosts many festivals, and the personality of the theater director remains a guiding force of Lithuanian theater.

Homo Novus: a festival of new and young

The first edition of Homo Novus in Daugavpils, which took place in March 1995, differed significantly from later festivals. It focused on student performances and included some

productions by young theater companies. The festival was labeled the Baltic theater festival, and its geographical scope included Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Russia. The program offered insight into the status of the younger generation of Latvian theater makers and some of the Baltic theater schools. It concentrated the potential of Latvian theater, featuring young artists who further determined the development of the theater and performance culture in Latvia. There were productions by the directors Viesturs Kairiņš and Dž. Dž. Džilindžers, acting students and recent graduates of the Studio of Riga Russian Drama Theater (now the Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre), the Daugavpils Theater, the New Riga Theater, and the Liepāja Theater. Lithuanian theater was represented by the productions of the young theater director Ignas Joninas and the choreographer Gianna Valenti. Estonian theater students presented a performance of stage fights, and The Class of Expressive Plastic Movement studio, led by Gennady Abramov of the Anatoly Vasiliev's Dramatic Art School from Moscow, presented a unique approach to non-verbal stage language. The program included several workshops and lectures as education was the core focus of the festival.

During the festival young theater critics published several issues of the festival newspaper, and a group of young set designers and scenography students playfully decorated the Daugavpils Theater and its surroundings. For the whole week, Daugavpils became the capital of theater, giving the stage to young theater makers who did not compete but celebrated their future in theater. The main audience of the festival, however, was its participants and theater fans from Riga. Homo Novus did not generate significant interest among the local population, and it was perceived as a foreign body like the Daugavpils Theater itself. It took almost 20 years and several changes of leadership before the Daugavpils Theater established a stable presence and image in the city and region.

In addition to the artistic program, Homo Novus always offered its participants and audiences an educational program, conferences, discussions, and a festival club as a meeting place for exchanges of ideas and celebrations. The festival was also constantly aware of its visual image and visibility in the city. Opening and closing parties of the festival were well-organized public events and aroused the curiosity and interest of the artistic community.

Subsequent festivals were focused on new names in directing in 1997, the role of dramaturgy and text in contemporary performance in 1999, site-specific theater in 2001, and diversity and contrasts in theatrical landscapes in 2003. The festival team chose these broad themes in response to the latest developments and to bring provocative issues into Latvian theater. In 1997, a new generation of theater directors entered the Latvian theater scene, but in 1999 the lack of new drama and an interest in different approaches to dramaturgy guided the choice of the theme. From the very beginning, the NTIL took an active position in advocating for cultural NGOs and changes in cultural policy. During Homo Novus 1999, together with foreign partners, the NTIL organized the international conference Baltic Theater Policy Review, a series of discussions on culture NGOs, intercultural collaboration, new directing, new drama, and a meeting of international festival directors. A cultural policy bent on preservation rather than renewal still prevailed, however, and, therefore, looking for alternative theatrical spaces outside of traditional theater venues in 2001 constituted a kind of protest against the closed system of institutional theaters. This initiative had far-reaching consequences – opening several locations in Riga for future public cultural events and introducing the site-specific approach in performing arts culture, which has

become a common practice nowadays. With this event, Homo Novus started to initiate its own productions and, over the course of the next 20 years, the NTIL produced around 120 performances, including international co-productions (Jonīte and Tiškeizere 2021, 189–195). For the first time, a large-scale contemporary circus performance – *Trix* by Cirkus Cirkör from Sweden – was presented in Latvia, and during the following years the NTIL regularly presented this genre, gradually accustoming the Latvian audience to its language. Today the contemporary circus is an integral part of the performing arts culture in Latvia thanks to the enthusiastic team of another NGO, *Pievilcīgas pilsētvides biedrība* (An Attractive Urban Environment Association), which took over this mission and since 2013 has organized a street and circus art festival in Riga. They also managed to convince the Ministry of Culture to change their policy regarding the Riga Circus, which is now a contemporary circus and interdisciplinary venue.

In 2003, the slogan of the festival was ‘Diversity and Contrasts,’ a response to the still quite homogeneous and conventional landscape of Latvian theater. In addition to theater performances, the program included two world music concerts and a showcase of short British and Nordic dance films. Homo Novus 2003 was the last edition of the festival under the guidance of Krilovs. During the early years, the festival featured Peeter Jalakas, Lembit Peterson, Priit Pedajas (Estonia), Oskaras Koršunovas, Benas Šarka (Lithuania), Jury Butusov, Yevgeny Grishkovets, Teatr.doc (Russia), Eric Lacascade (France), Igor Bauersima (Germany), Passage Nord (Norway), Stuffed Puppet Theatre (The Netherlands), Baktruppen (Norway), Cryptic (Scotland), Josse de Pauw (Belgium), and Kristian Smeds (Finland), among others. Homo Novus evolved from a regional event focusing on theater education to an international gathering, and with each new presentation tackled topical questions in Latvian theater. Several generations of young theater producers have acknowledged its crucial role in educating them about contemporary theater trends and expanding their perspectives to the international context (Radzobe 2015, 12–17; Burāne 2020).

Conclusion

This article introduced three Baltic theater festivals – Baltoscandal in Estonia, LIFE in Lithuania, and Homo Novus in Latvia – showing that they were agents of change and internationalization within the performing arts field in the 1990s. Their impact on the development of theater and performance culture in the Baltic countries requires further research. These Baltic international theater festivals that emerged in the 1990s played an important role in the development and internationalization of theater and performance culture, and the democratization of the perception of theater in the Baltic countries. At a time of intense artistic experience and performance in collaborative and developmental modes (Klaic 2014, 32–33), the festivals were able to stimulate not only the appreciation of new theater language and production models, but also wider processes and changes at the level of cultural policy and in society in general. This article shows that the backgrounds, artistic interests, and personal qualities of the festival directors were crucial in not only the programming of the festivals and their special atmospheres, but also through the festivalizing processes which determined the development and perception of theater and performance culture in the Baltic countries.

The three Baltic theater festivals corresponded to the definition of the theatrical event by Willmar Sauter (2007b, 205). They derived from the specific socio-political and cultural contexts of the respective countries. They subverted contextual

theatricality by introducing alternative aesthetics and means of expression in contrast to the prevailing method of psychological realism. They introduced and developed new modes of theatrical performance, changing 'the actual communication between the performer and the spectator during the event' (Sauter 2004, 12). Finally, they also reinforced playing culture, widening the understanding and perception of theater and performance, and proving that 'theater, therefore, is not restricted to a few traditional genres, but includes a wide range of cultural performances' (13).

Nowadays, in Estonia there is a comparatively high level of self-organization of the performing arts community through professional associations. The diversity of the organizational forms of theater is acknowledged at a policy level, opening access to permanent state subsidies for the most convincing and stable privately established theaters as early as the end of the 1990s. In terms of the development of performative and interdisciplinary artistic practices, Estonian theater and performance is the leader among the Baltic countries. In Lithuania, theater still seems to be mostly organized around individual directors, whose artistic leadership and directorial styles are the guiding standards. Homo Novus strove to maintain a balance between productions, seeking to transform conventional psychological theater and to introduce other forms of theater and performance considered new in the context of Latvian theater. The dominant role of institutional repertory theaters forced the festival organizers to remain in a constant dialogue with the existing theater tradition. The festival always performed the educational function of organizing workshops, discussions, conferences, and additional programs, and became a platform for experimental work by the younger generation of Latvian theater producers.

The festival LIFE ended in 2001 after flagging ticket sales and growing debts. In Vilnius in 2004, the managing team of the Oskaras Koršunovas Theater established the international theater festival Sirenos, which continued the path begun by LIFE, offering a selection of big international names, and adding a Lithuanian showcase to the program. Since 2004, the artistic director of Baltoscandal has been the Estonian curator and producer Priit Raud. In 2005, the Latvian curators Gundega Laiviņa and Zane Kreicberga took over the leadership of the Homo Novus festival.

Notes

1. Stanislavski's method is a systematic approach to an actor's training developed by the Russian theater practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) at the beginning of the twentieth century. The method mainly focuses on character or role creation and psychological interpretation. During the Soviet period, Stanislavski's system was canonized as the only accepted theater training and acting approach in the USSR.
2. Ruto Killakund was the autonomous theater group created by Peeter Jalakas in 1989, which later became the basis of the Von Krahle Theater, established in 1992.
3. In *Estonian Theatre* Jaak Rähesoo designates autonomous groups as 'little theaters' (Rähesoo 1999, 205–213).

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