

## DANCE THEATRE IN LATVIA

The landscape of professional theatre in Latvia would not be complete without dance theatre.<sup>1</sup> The concept 'theatre' has several meanings in Latvia: it can refer to a building, a troupe or an art form. In accordance with the institutional tradition, the theatre is the building. In this sense, there is no dance theatre in Latvia. The shortage and costliness of rehearsal spaces, as well as the lack of appropriate performance spaces for dance, constitute significant problems of infrastructure. As regards theatre as a troupe operating on a regular basis and subsidized by state, only the Ballet Troupe of the Latvian National Opera functions in this way. The only company consistently working in the field of contemporary dance is the Olga Zitluhina Dance Company, which has been active continuously since 1996, in spite of not receiving regular public funding. As regards theatre as a form of performing arts, contemporary dance as a part of professional performing arts in Latvia can be discussed for the period after 2003, when the first contemporary dance choreographers graduated from the Latvian Academy of Culture (LAC); however, the contemporary dance movement started much earlier. Some of the most important facts and turning points in the history of dance theatre in Latvia demonstrate how non-ballet dance has become professional and established a place for itself in the Latvian cultural space.

The 1920s was the time when both classical and modern dance emerged. Visiting performances took place in Latvia: Mary Wigman and Rudolf von Laban, among other artists, performed here. Many private ballet and 'rhythmo-plastic' studios existed before 1932, when a state-financed ballet school was founded under the auspices of the Latvian National Opera. The priorities in the field of dance were defined prior to the founding of a ballet school, the final decision being influenced by the recognition that classical ballet would perfectly serve the needs of the opera.

Democratic modern dance, focusing on the individual, had even less chance to develop during the authoritarian regime of the President Kārlis Ulmanis (1934–1939), when rhythmic exercise in large groups was supported as the main form of dance. Besides, the more talented dance artists chose

to work in Western Europe already in the 1920s. (Schools of 'rhythmo-plastic' were even forbidden by law in Soviet Russia in 1924.)<sup>2</sup> Many artists left Latvia during World War II and continued their work abroad. After the war, within the framework of Socialist Realism, the situation of modern dance became even more difficult. This explains why during the time when postmodern dance had already appeared in the world, ballet experienced its 'golden age' in the Latvian SSR, also serving as a propaganda tool: before the funerals of top Communist Party officials, as well as during the *putsch* of 1991, *Swan Lake* was broadcasted on television.

Although dance professionals in Latvia did not have a chance to meet foreign artists face-to-face, the companies of Jose Limon, Paul Taylor and others gave performances in the USSR. The ballet troupe of Maurice Bejart visited Moscow in 1978, and their performances left a deep impression on **Olga Zitluhina** (b. 1960) – then a student at the Leningrad Institute of Culture and later the initiator of professional dance theatre in Latvia. Influenced by performances and the very limited literature that was available<sup>3</sup>, the future choreographers were working more or less illicitly: in the cultural space of the USSR, if you operated at an amateur level, you had freer possibilities of expression.

The safe territory of amateur art became a shelter for two extraordinary companies – the Riga Pantomime and the Ansis Rūtentāls' Movement Theatre. **Ansis Rūtentāls** (1949–2000) created experimental productions based on the interpretation of music through movement. His productions reached a high level of abstraction that the censors could not decipher. The dance with cardboard shadow silhouettes in the production *Reflections (Atspulgi)*, 1984 can be interpreted as a reference to control and manipulation, so characteristic of the Soviet system. Some of the dancers of this theatre later began to develop modern dance in Latvia.<sup>4</sup>

With the restoration of independence, there was the opportunity to attend workshops led by teachers from the West, as well as the possibility of visiting European countries and the USA. At this time, two professional companies still existed in addition to ballet in Latvia – The State Dance Ensemble *Daile* (abolished in 1997), which mainly focused on stage folk dance, and the Operetta (later Riga Musical Theatre, abolished in 1996). Both troupes sustained a high professional level of dance. Like other semi-professional collectives, they often employed high-level pedagogues and choreographers who, for political or personal reasons, were unwelcome in the Opera. Moreover, unlike the ballet troupe, where the attitude towards

non-ballet was still cautious, the dancers of the *Daile* and Musical Theatre were among the first during the 1990s to turn to other principles of dance technique and composition.

After visiting the American Dance Festival in 1995, **Arnis Siliņš**<sup>5</sup> founded the non-governmental organization *VIA Dance* with several like-minded companions, with the goal of organizing visiting performances and workshops, as well as promoting the general development of the genre of contemporary dance in Latvia. After a couple of successful projects, dance processes were also affected by the bankruptcy of the *Bank Baltija*: *VIA Dance* lost its money in this bank, and with this the energy to continue vanished. After the dissolution of the dance ensemble *Daile* and the Riga Musical Theatre, professional dance (which in practice meant the ballet troupe) did not show enthusiasm about the openness of the world. However, the few professionals who had seen enough “to believe in the possibility of high-level professionalism in modern dance”<sup>6</sup> continued to develop professionalism in the new dance, a process that was advanced by fortuitous occurrences and logical developments. Latvians returned from exile: Aija Paegle taught modern dance at the Riga Choreography School (RCS) from 1995 onwards. The wife of a missionary in Dubulti Parish was American choreographer Sharon Perry, and she taught classical modern dance at the RCS from 1995, as well as greatly contributing to the creation of the Department of Contemporary Dance Choreography at the Latvian Academy of Culture (1999). In addition, the Riga Stage Concert Union (*Rīgas Estrādes Koncertapvienība*), having been an export commodity of the Latvian SSR and focusing mainly on show dance, also produced several enthusiasts of contemporary dance (Ramona Galkina, Ingūna Ieviņa and Arnis Siliņš).

However, since the mid 1990s, contemporary dance in Latvia and especially its development into a professional and acknowledged genre was largely connected with the purposeful work of one extraordinary personality. In 1996, Olga Zitluhina and her companions formed the **Olga Zitluhina Dance Company**. Simultaneously, a process of promoting dance took place outside the company. In 1995, Olga Zitluhina started to teach modern dance at the RCS, and in 1997, at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music (JVLAM), which at the time was the only higher education institution for dance studies in Latvia. In 1998, the Olga Zitluhina Dance Company visited New York and performed at the Dance Theatre Workshop. This was a stimulus for the Latvian media to take notice of the new processes in the field of dance. In 1999, a Contemporary Dance Programme (under the title of ‘Modern Dance’

until 2011) was established at the LAC under the guidance of Olga Zitluhina; an important part of the programme is teaching by visiting professors from abroad. That same year, the State Culture Capital Foundation started to allocate funding for contemporary dance projects, which shows that contemporary dance was taking its place as a professional art form.

In 2002, contemporary dance entered the Opera with a project by Olga Zitluhina – a contemporary dance production for the family *Alice (Alise)*, based on the work *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Even though the performers were ballet school students, this was the first time a full evening performance of contemporary dance was created on the stage of the Latvian National Opera. (The first contemporary dance production with the participation of the ballet troupe, *Aplam* in 2010, was also created by Olga Zitluhina.) Since 2002, contemporary dance is also taught at the Latvian Culture College (LCC), where the main driving force behind the programme is **Ilze Zīriņa**, who also established the company ***ZI.temp.dance*** in 2004. The first choreographers graduated from the LAC in 2003. The Latvian Association of Professional Contemporary Dance Choreographers ([www.dance.lv](http://www.dance.lv)) was established that same year – first led by Sarmīte Mončaka and since 2005 by Ilze Zīriņa. Now that there were young professionals, the Olga Zitluhina Dance Company announced an official audition, in 2003, and from this time on, the company is able to call itself a professional troupe.

### The Olga Zitluhina Dance Company

The works by Olga Zitluhina have a great vitality in the Latvian cultural space, and, moreover, are multicultural, since Zitluhina is Russian born, lives and dances in Latvia, and has mastered choreography in Leningrad and at the JVLAM. Influences from Finnish and British contemporary dance can be observed in the activities of Olga Zitluhina and other choreographers, as workshops in those countries have been attended by Latvian choreographers. In addition to this, Finnish and British choreographers have often worked in Latvia, for example, Fiona Millward (UK) has assisted Zitluhina in the creation of several productions.

Initially, the troupe was more active abroad than in Latvia, where the new dance was still little known. The choreography, lighting and costumes were all created by the artistic leader. Until 2003, only women participated in the troupe, and the aesthetics of productions could be compared to the “activities

of the US modernists of the second-generation – Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. They also created a strong link between the dance techniques and choreographies, thus establishing specific technical and aesthetic ideals of movement and dancing bodies that corresponded to their individual vision of modern dance.<sup>37</sup> Around 2000, some new tendencies appeared, for instance, the costumes for the production *Men Wanted* (2001) were created by costume designer Sheila, and cooperation with her continued in later projects. The production includes more everyday movements and is more theatrical than the preceding productions. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the understanding of human nature and sense of humour in playing with situations, characteristic of Olga Zitluhina, is manifested in almost all the productions. The choreographer herself has tended to minimize the presence of humour in productions, being aware that humour is what people expect of her.

2003 was the beginning of an intensively creative period for this professional troupe, which aimed to establish a place for itself in the Latvian cultural space. The first full-length productions were created, and collaboration with musicians began. The main author of the productions was still Olga



*Take 735*, Olga Zitluhina Dance Company, 2006.

Zitluhina, however, now that the dancers were professionally educated, these productions were jointly created. In 2004, the first professional dance theatre production *When the Owl's Tail Will Blossom...* (*Kad pūcei aste ziedēs...*) was created, with original music by the rock band *Dzelzs Vilks*. (Up to 2011, Olga Zitluhina has cooperated with this band on seven productions.) In 2003, the troupe first began to use the term 'dance theatre'. One of the reasons for using this term was rather prosaic: in order to be eligible for funding, one has to fit into some sort of genre. It became clear that the new dance is



*Two and One Hug*, Olga Zitluhina Dance Company, premiered in September 2008 at the Southbank Center London (UK).

Performers: Ilze Ziriņa, Andris Kačanovskis.

closer to the theatre than to ballet. Thus, the phrase 'dance theatre' became a concept used in project proposals. At the same time, Olga Zitluhina prefers to avoid associating her productions with theatre in order to emphasize the value of productions based on movement, which are governed by different rules. However, the traditions of dramatic theatre and plot-based ballet are so strong that the creators of dance productions, most likely unconsciously, also choose literary sources for their inspiration in order to attract spectators. Thus, Olga Zitluhina created the production *Bicycle* (*Velosipēds*, 2007), based on the life of the Latvian poet Rainis and his play *Half Idealist* (*Pusideālists*). Comprehensibility might also constitute one of the reasons why the production *And Again about the Same. Part I* (*Un atkal par to pašu. I daļa*, 2005) is the troupe's most popular and loved production – the theme of this production being love.

In recent years, Olga Zitluhina continues to bring her ideas to life, both in terms of exploring movement (the movement pattern for the production *Dances of the Lost*, 2008, being created as the interaction of a duet, consisting of one active and one relatively passive dancer/follower), as well as in terms of spatial and temporal experiments. In circumstances when dance does not have any space and when time is fluid, the exploration of space (a search for a home) become an artistic instrument. In the project *Water Pieces* (*Ūdensgabali*, 2005) dancers dived into the Riga City Council fountain; the production *Road Movie* (2006) was a four-hour long marathon in the streets of Old Riga, while *Labyrinth* (*Labirints*, 2009) was set in a structure created by set designer Reinis Suhanovs and was also a political production, even incorporating parliamentary debate. Social activity, which was less visible in the previous period of Zitluhina's work, continues in the cycle of productions *Ursus Maritimus*, initiated in 2010, which is devoted to ecological issues.

Choreographers from abroad have also created productions with the Olga Zitluhina Dance Company. One example is the production *Your Experience Here* (*Tava pieredze šeit*, 2010) by Heather Olson from the USA. Olga Zitluhina also encourages her dancers to be choreographers in the company. The first to respond to this call was **Valery Olyehno**, who created the production *MaLoKo* (2007). He was followed by **Dmitri Gaytyukevich** with *Dix-Huit Pas* (2009), based on the novel *Perfume* (*Das Parfum*) by Patrick Süskind. After this experience, both young choreographers continue to realise their ideas. *The Dream of Girls* (*Meiteņu sapnis*, 2010) – a solo production by Gaytyukevich – has been performed outside Latvia, whereas *Inside* (2011)

marked the opening of the era of dance on the *O!Karte* New Stage of the National Theatre. After leaving the Olga Zitluhina Dance Company, Olyehno created one of the most successful productions of the season, *Without Wires* (2011), at the Gertrūdes Street Theatre. This production, at the borderline of theatre and dance, shows that this form of creativity will continue to vex those who prefer strictly categorized art.

### The First Professionally Educated Generations

In 2003, eight graduates of the first choreography course of the LAC joined the Olga Zitluhina Dance Company. In addition to their activities in the company, they also worked in theatres, concerts, musicals, the circus and even with figure skaters. Several graduates continued their education and dance activities abroad, and some of them are coming back with new contacts and experiences. Others work with amateur groups, thus promoting contemporary dance among the general public.

After the graduation of the students attending the second course at the LAC (2008), contemporary dance was already known, and it was easier for graduates to find jobs in their profession instead of going over to other, related fields. In 2008, the project *Dance Anatomy* was born, and until 2011, seven productions have been created in its framework, along with successful visits abroad. The diversity of works is remarkable; some of the productions have a social and political message, for example, *I Am Dialogue (Es esmu dialogs, 2009, by Elīna Breice)*. After graduating in 2008, **Rūta Nordmane** established the dance theatre *Boot&Boat (Būtenbouts)*, which appeared on the scene with a remarkable production *Four Men in a Boat (Četri vīri laivā)*. Nordmane teaches contemporary dance in one of the best amateur dance studios – the dance school *Dzirnas*. The leader of the school, **Agris Daņiļevičs**, is one of the most popular Latvian choreographers, who has started combining folk dance with modern and show dance.

Since 2006, the International Contemporary Dance Festival *Laiks Dejot (Time to Dance)* has been a significant element in the development of dance in Latvia. The festival presents Latvian productions, along with a range of visiting productions and a workshop programme. The activities of the New Theatre Institute of Latvia are also significant in the international context: during the last three years, dance has been included in the Latvian Theatre Showcase for professionals from abroad organized by this institute, and in



terms of cultural policy contemporary dance has grown into a significant art form. However, the showcase is mostly attended by theatre people; thus, recognition and performances abroad are due to the guests of the festival *Laiks dejot* and the activity of choreographers themselves.

The number of contemporary dance productions in Latvia is growing. In recent years, the Ģertrūdes Street Theatre, Dirty Deal Teatro and the New Stage of the National Theatre have developed into important performance spaces. Dance productions are included in the repertoire, thus reducing the number of unfortunate cases where a lot of work and money is put into a production that is performed only a couple of times. For the time being, only productions with a small number of participants and minimum technical costs are performed regularly. The project system is a bar to long-term planning and large-scale productions.

No data are available as to what percentage of theatre audiences attend dance performances. Nevertheless, the audiences of institutional theatre also encounter contemporary dance. Many choreographers of theatre productions



*I Am Dialogue*, Dance Anatomy, 2009.  
From the left: Monta Vandere, Agnese Bordjukova.

(e.g., Inga Raudinga, Inga Krasovska and Anta Priedite) have received training in contemporary dance and base their work on its principles, and they are influencing theatre through their specific way of thinking. A reciprocal link can also be observed: a wish to collaborate with directors can be seen in works by several choreographers (including the graduates of 2011). Thus, part of the performance obtains a narrative structure, something that was previously uncharacteristic of Latvian contemporary dance. The possibility of interpreting dance performances verbally broadens the audience spectrum by attracting theatre-goers; however, those who love dance due to its poetics without words might be disappointed. At the same time, some collaborative productions succeed in enriching both sides. The tendency to move outside the limits of genres reached Latvia somewhat later than Western Europe, but it has arrived.

Internet sources: [www.dance.lv](http://www.dance.lv), [www.journal.dance.lv](http://www.journal.dance.lv), [www.ozdc.lv](http://www.ozdc.lv), [www.theatre.lv](http://www.theatre.lv), [www.git.lv](http://www.git.lv), [www.dejasanatomija.lv](http://www.dejasanatomija.lv), [www.butenbouts.lv](http://www.butenbouts.lv), [www.lka.edu.lv](http://www.lka.edu.lv), [www.kulturaskoledza.lv](http://www.kulturaskoledza.lv)

## References

- <sup>1</sup> The expression 'dance theatre' is used alongside the more conventional term 'contemporary dance', since: i) this book explores the art of dance as part of the theatre landscape; ii) the notion 'dance theatre' also covers stage performance of ballet, along with all other kinds of dance, and it is important to examine dance in its wider scope in order to explain the context; iii) the notion 'dance theatre' is most often used by theatre professionals in Latvia in order to describe all movement productions, which members of the dance world would call 'dance performances', 'contemporary dance performances', 'physical theatre', 'dance theatre' or describe by some other, freely chosen term, such as 'dance drama', 'music-dance play', 'experimentally instrumental dance performance'. They might also avoid emphasizing any relevance to a specific genre or style.
- <sup>2</sup> Galkina, Ramona. Master's Thesis *Olga Žitluhinas dejas kompānija un mūsdienu dejas attīstība Latvijā. 1996–2006 (Olga Žitluhina Dance Company and Development of Contemporary Dance in Latvia. 1996–2006)*, Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> It was prohibited to import *Dance Magazine* into Latvian SSR; however, a deposit copy was available in the library. As Andris Vītiņš, a retired ballet dancer and classmate of Mikhail Baryshnikov, told us, all the issues of magazine had to be photographed page by page in the library toilet.
- <sup>4</sup> In Latvia in the 1990s, the phrase 'modern dance' referred to the new forms of the art of dance that were different from ballet. Occasionally used was the term

'free plastics', borrowed from the time between the wars. 'Modern dance' was often used as a synonym for 'contemporary dance'. As the first local professionals of contemporary dance appeared, the disparities emerged. Since then, professional activities and dance productions have been consistently called 'contemporary dance' (*laikmetīgā dejas*), while amateur movements of various dance styles (hip-hop, break, show dance, street dance, jazz dance, etc.) use the expression 'modern-day dance' (*mūsdienų dejas*).

<sup>5</sup> Arnis Siliņš has danced with the Operetta Theatre and the Riga Stage Concert Union; since 1987, he has been learning, practicing and teaching yoga, as well as cultivating the movement of meditative contemporary dance in Latvia; he hopes to focus on environmental dance projects once again.

<sup>6</sup> Galkina, Ramona. Master's Thesis *Olgas Žitluhinas dejas kompānija un mūsdienų dejas attīstība Latvijā*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.