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Laura Stasane

New Theatre Institute of Latvia (NTIL)

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Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

New Theatre Institute of Latvia (NTIL) Leading the Latvia Performing Arts World since the 1990

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Located on the east coast of the Baltic Sea, the Republic of Latvia became independent from the former Soviet Union in 1991. Based in the capital city of Riga, the New Theatre Institute of Latvia (NTIL) with its producer Laura Stasane is the co-organizer of the country's representative performing arts festivals, "Homo Novus." In this interview with Stasane, we learn about Latvia's independent performing arts scene, which until now has been little known to the Japanese audience.

Interviewer: Takao Norikoshi, dance critic

Latvia became independent from the former Soviet Union in 1991 to from the country it is today, and in 2004 it became a member of the European Union. How do you feel this has changed the environment for country's artists?

The biggest change has been in mobility. In the old days you had to get a visa to go out of the country, and there were also various limitations on foreigners coming into Latvia. At the airports, I used to feel so jealous when I saw the lines of foreigners with EU passports. If it had been easier for us to go back and forth between countries, I'm sure Latvian artists would have done more traveling to other countries.

Now there are various grants available from the EU for artistic activities, and this has expanded the range of mobility and possibilities for artists greatly. The scale and the things we can do with our projects have also changed. Although we are now independent, having joined the EU has been a good thing for Latvia also in terms of our relationship with our giant neighbor, Russia

Latvia has a population of about 1.96 million people. As for its ethnic make-up, it is about 60% Latvian and 25% Russian. Historically as well, it was long under the influence of Russia. Does Russian culture still have a strong influence in Latvia?

Yes, it has. There are influences in art and it the world outlook in general. Yet, rather than saying that our culture in Latvia is a fusion of Latvian and Russian culture, I would say it is more like the two cultures exist in parallel here, and it has continued that way naturally.

You are NTIL's producer and program manager. Can we begin by asking you to tell us about your personal background?

I feel that two things are very important in my background, the fact that was born and

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raised in the Soviet era and that I experienced Latvia's independence in 1991. Because, the country that I was born in no longer exists, and even though I may live in the same city, it is now a different country. There has long been a belief in Latvia that after independence there should be freedom. It was alive in the memory of my grandparent's generation that experience the first independence after World War I (1918) and that desire for freedom carried over into my generation. But, I never thought we would gain our independence from the Soviet Union in my lifetime. However, we did gain our independence in 1991, when I was a teenager.

When I was 18 I started studying Norwegian and went to study in Norway, at a high school. Attending a high school in a small country village at such an impressionable age was a big experience for me. After I returned to Latvia, I went to a university in the capital, Riga, and studied in courses related to international studies, but I wasn't satisfied with the level of the courses, so I quit after one year. I transferred to a university in Norway where I studied visual communication. This was research in ways to use images to communicate things in fields ranging from architecture and film to cultural anthropology and more. It mainly involves thinking about visual education and concepts.

When I returned to Latvia after finishing my studies, I saw a production by Olga Zitluhina, a dancer and choreographer who was working ambitiously on the Riga dance scene. I found that contemporary dance fit perfectly with what I had been learning in my visual communication studies. Dance is in many ways a more visual and abstract art than theater, because there is not necessarily a need to follow a plot or story.

What was Olga's dance like?

She was a pioneer of contemporary dance in Latvia. She was originally trained in ballet, but in the 1990s she went to the American Dance Festival Summer dance courses with other dancers from the Baltic region with support from the Soros Foundation, and there she encountered contemporary dance for the first time. When she returned to Latvia she started a dance company where she taught this new tradition, and later she would start a university dance department.

When I heard about her work, I also took her dance classes. Eventually Olga established a contemporary dance department at the Latvian Academy of Culture. At that time, I was working full-time at an ad agency, but when I found out that a dance department had been formed, I couldn't contain myself. I got permission from my boss to go to dance classes in the morning and then worked at the company from lunchtime. It made for a hard daily schedule. Eventually, I started helping Olga out with her management work, and it got to the point where I had to decide whether to work at the ad agency or do management work. We have a saying in Latvian that essentially says if you put your finger in something, go ahead and put your whole hand in, so I made the choice and quit the ad agency.

But wasn't it hard to make a living as a freelance dance manager in Latvia at the time?

It was much harder than I thought it would be (laughs). I will never forget the first foreign dance artist I invited to Latvia after I started working as a freelance manager/

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producer. It was the French artist Xavier Le Roy who did conceptual work, which in our context at that time meant it wasn't dance. It was a lecture-performance and dance shows like this were not seen in Latvia, but I thought it was fantastic art. After a while I figured out that working freelance in contemporary arts in Riga had its limits; I was constantly broke and took part-time jobs to earn a living. It was at that time that I learned about NTIL where I work today. I took part in a training program for young arts managers that they organized and eventually joined the team in 2005.

New Theatre Institute of Latvia (NTIL) and its festival

NTIL is an organization that was founded in 1998 by a group of 33 independent artists.

Yes. The founding members were a diverse group of actors, directors and managers, and all are now well-known figures in their fields. At the time they were all young and vigorous. To establish the organization they needed assets as collateral, and since they didn't have money they brought together all kinds of odds and ends that had any value at all, like bicycles.

NTIL was founded first of all to run an international theater festival, Homo Novus. At that time there was no international exchange in the performing arts. It was the idea of Pēteris Krilovs, who is a theater and film director himself and was teaching a theater course at that time. He wanted to create exchange with other theater student performances from neighboring countries like Lithuania, Estonia, Finland. The first edition of Homo Novus was done by him and his students and colleagues in a kind of do-it-yourself style and the festival mood was fantastic! This kind of great motivation is more important in the end than the right kind of education. More important than having a university degree in arts management is having the strong desire to do something.

When you joined NTIL in 2005, we hear that it had only a few staff members didn't it?

Yes, it was just four or five people. But it was more than now. Soon some of the founding NTIL people quit. It appears they were waiting to hand it over to the next generation. So we started without much knowledge but with huge interest to explore. We hardly knew the international scene. Anyway, if we just waited, no important artists would come to Latvia of their own initiative, so our job was to go to other countries ourselves and watch and think what we could bring to the festival in Riga.

Around what time do you believe that contemporary dance really began in Latvia?

That is a good question. It depends of course on how you define contemporary dance, but the tradition as it is now in Latvia began with Olga, who I mentioned earlier. Another important figure was Ansis Rūtentāls, who was active in the 1980s and 1990s. For nearly two decades Rūtentāls was leader of his Movement Theater, which worked in the pantomime tradition and made work that was avant-garde and carried strong messages. Unfortunately, after he died in 2000, his company lost its strength.

We have worked for a long time to establish the term "contemporary dance," but in

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Latvia today it is still common that when you say “dance” the only things that come to most people’s minds are ballet or social dance or folk dance.

From the Soviet era, ballet has been very strongly implanted. Folk dance is a somewhat complex case because it represented the Latvian national identity which was banned during the Soviet era. However, at the same time it was accepted as dance of the working class. So, there were folk dance groups in every school or village and there were also several state folk dance companies with very high-level professionalism, but in truth it was a kind of folk ballet and had little to do with tradition.

With a background like that, weren’t young artists in Latvia feverishly excited after the country became independent in 1991 and free expression from the West began pouring in and they learned about the free and richly expressive contemporary dance that was going on all around the world?

It didn’t happen like that. Things remained quiet, and that surprised me and made me wonder why. Latvia is geographically on the outer margin of Europe. There wasn’t really a culture of exchanging ideas with other countries. It is different from Central European countries like France, Germany and Belgium, where people are used to moving around from one country to another and there is more of a free flow and exchange of ideas. There is definitely more freedom of movement and more travelling after we joined the EU, but in general people in Latvia tend to stay where they are, and if they do go abroad, they usually stay there and don’t come back.

Returning to the subject of NTIL, could you tell us about how much your annual budget is?

It differs a bit by year and the numbers alone will not tell you much, since you would have to see it in the light of the country’s economy. You can’t compare it to the budgets of our partner organizations or festivals in France, Germany or Belgium, but I would say that we manage to deliver very good content with what we have. So I imagine that even people in Latvia would expect that we work with a far more generous budget.

We receive a three-year subsidy from the Ministry of Culture which they make an open call for, and that covers some of our operating expenses.

The rest of our budget comes in the form of support from other grant-giving organizations. Locally, the most important source is the Latvian State Culture Capital Foundation (SCCF), which has regular application calls for projects and special-focus programs. We also apply for grants from the City Council on a yearly basis. Yet with local sources alone you can’t work in international activities. We are currently partners in four different international networks which are co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of European Union. The EU grants can cover up to 50% of the project expenses.

You don’t have a theater of your own?

We don’t. We have varied activities - not only production, but also training programs, residency and educational programs that are not public events; we collaborate with other venues and we work a lot with the city and urban space. So, it is a conscious

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choice not to have a venue with a regular public program, which would be a very different reality.

Since 1995, NTIL runs Homo Novus festival.

For a large part of the population of Latvia, going to performances, concerts and exhibitions was well rooted in the way of life, especially during the Soviet era when art was a means to experience freedom that you couldn't have in your daily life. It is also a Soviet tradition to have repertory theaters, a system that still dominates today. The quality of work can be very good but there are few new formats. In Homo Novus we try to bring to our audiences something that they would probably not experience otherwise, to introduce new ways of thinking, new approaches and formats, and artists that care and take responsibility. Through that, we also present context and issues in other places in the world to remind us that we are not isolated. That is still as important today as it was 1995. Nowadays, we work much more with the city space, closed buildings and abandoned factory spaces become festival venues, and even for local people it is a new way to interact with the city. We always produce new work by local artists for the festival instead of presenting existing shows. It's again in order to give new context and create different opportunities from the usual production rhythm.

We hear that you also have a residency program.

Yes. But we don't have an official place for residencies, but we collaborate with very different spaces according to the needs. Since Latvia is a small country, we usually know the people involved even in the regions outside the capital. The places vary from studios to private homes and generally we do the curation involved.

In Riga there are factories and buildings that were simply abandoned when the Soviet Union collapsed, so I think it can be interesting to see how they can be used as assets for creative development. Many more buildings were also left vacant when the 2009 European debt crisis struck (the crisis that spread through Europe when Greece defaulted on its national debt), with many left unfinished while under construction. So, there are lots of empty spaces throughout the city, and when we ask the owners if we can use them for a project, the answer is usually, OK. It is also a way to create a stronger connection to the city where you live, both for us, for artists and audiences.

Do you pay to use these spaces?

It depends on the contents of the contract, but even when we do pay, it can be less than renting a theater. In 2011, we used the facilities of an old music school that had closed down for our festival center. It was near the center of the city, with beautiful wooden architecture and a garden, but it stood empty. After we used it for our festival, its value was rediscovered and it was then refurbished as an arts center by some great young people. It is now a popular spot for the young people of Riga, and a bar has been opened in it and its hall is now used for concerts, film screenings, performances, etc. I think it is wonderful that something like a festival, which is not itself a permanent thing, can inspire something permanent in the city life.

Using public places for performances is unique, but doesn't it present problems in

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terms of the size of audiences you can accommodate? Looking at the photos there was a performance held in the space between apartment buildings, and in that case isn't there a limit in the number of people that can see one performance?

Those buildings were nine stories tall and there were many people watching from their balconies, and from those of surrounding buildings (laughs). When you consider a dance performance in a theater there may be seating for 100 or 200, but at that time I'm sure we had many more people than that watching. However, the truly important thing isn't the number of viewers but how you move the hearts of the viewers. Once we did a project at a library about the significance of gestures for people of the local community. It was quite a while after that when I went to that library and the lady there told me what a strange thing it had been for them and how it had taken a long time to realize just how wonderful it had been. I believe that is what's important.

European Capital of Culture and "Dance Moves Cities"

For 2014, Riga was designated a European Capital of Culture. And this brought a big budget for your projects.

But that also made us stop and think. If we continued to follow our existing festival formula that increased budget would make it possible to hold it on a larger scale than ever before. But, given this chance, we decided to try doing some new things that we couldn't do in our usual festival format. So we started some new projects and extended the festival feeling to one year so that we could present a program that had one big event a month for the whole year.

For that festival you invited contact Gonzo from Japan.

I invited them for the international project "Dance Moves Cities" that I curated. This was a project where we invited dance artists to do residencies in a number of countries and create works with local dancers. With the EU funding it became a two-year project conducted jointly in the three European cities of Riga (Latvia), Cracow (Poland) and Terni (Italy). The first time I saw contact Gonzo in a short performance, where they interacted with a sculpture in the lobby of a museum in Yokohama, it immediately struck me and I thought, "What is this? It's amazing! I have got to work with them somehow in the future."

They did a three-week residency in the streets and parks of one of Riga's neighborhoods and worked with seven Latvian dancers on a new creation. The result was an installation in one of the historic buildings of the neighborhood and a live performance in the ruins of another neighborhood house. It was quite an apocalyptic scene! Many people came to see it, some because it was a European Capital of Culture event, others because they lived in the neighborhood and noticed something going on. contact Gonzo introduced their style and they really managed to open new perspectives for the Latvian dancers, because I have never seen them perform in that quality before or after. Anyway, it was so honest that some local passers by thought there was real fighting going on. After the performance a couple of elderly ladies came up to us. They had travelled across Riga for this event and I first thought they would be shocked or angry for what they had to watch, but they were so happy!

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If you were going to take performances to a local community like that, didn't you think it would be safer to take some type of beautiful dance that anyone would appreciate?

Personally, I am tired of that kind of "beautiful" dance (laughs). I like the honesty and sense of humor in contact Gonzo's dance. Just when you think they are beginning to fight seriously, they will suddenly do something that makes you laugh. Rather than trying to be the serious artists, they do powerful work on a more human level, and in that I see intelligence. It may look to some like just five minutes of fighting, but it is never crude.

The place where they performed in Riga was a no-trespassing area. So you might say that what we did was illegal (laughs). If we had applied to authorities for permits to use these places, we would probably have not gotten the permission. But the art contact Gonzo made there was so wonderful. So, we decided to use it anyway. If someone had notified the police, we surely would have been forced to cancel, but in the two evenings we held performances there, no one called the police (laughs).

That really took courage to follow through with (laughs).

Of course, there have been times when people did call the police, claiming that we were "disturbing the peace and order" But, it shows how interesting different people's reactions can be. In one place where it really was dangerous, no one objected, but in another place where we had permission and it was safe, someone called the police. The dancers were not happy, they wanted it to be nice but I feel it is important at times for us and the artists to also experience other reactions, because it is reality.

For "Dance Moves Cities" you also invited the leader of "fieldworks," Heine Avdal and Yukiko Shinozaki, who are based in Brussels and Oslo and do performances in non-theater venues in various countries. In Japan, they have given a performance titled *Aoyama Borrowed Landscape* (2015) as part of their "Borrowed Landscape" series that uses spaces like gardens as "borrowed landscapes." Their performance used props consisting of various sized boxes that keep changing, and in the end they spray champagne on the audience (laughs).

We had them in a residency in a small town and we had them create a work with local context and performers. It was a work where performers led the audience in small groups through an old villa using no verbal communication but smaller and bigger black cubes that appeared mysteriously. So many spectators turned up that we had to keep extending the performance time until the last person had seen it. I think everyone was exhausted in the end. Still, it was wonderful! And what's more, one of the local artists that participated started working with Heine and Yukiko and is now touring with them.

Looking to the future

In the past you have said that there are good dancers in Latvia but it is difficult to get a good choreographer. This is a problem that seems to be common in most countries, so what are your thoughts about education?

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Unfortunately, I don't have any good answer. Basically, the most we can do is supply support through artistic projects. Another thing we can do is help create opportunities for young artists who have received training in dance to do collaborative work with established artists or artists from other countries. And, the important thing is that they should also experience collaboration on equal footing, not just assisting.

We also propose training programs that focus on certain aspects of creative work, like dramaturgy or relation with space. In Latvia, when you say "drama" it means theater to most people. So when we speak about dramaturgy in dance, it's important to distinguish between narrative and development of the piece. This something I am personally interested in.

Also, to survive as a choreographer in Latvia, you have to be prepared to do a variety of things like working for theater productions, teaching and doing your own creative work. But, it isn't necessarily the case that the busier the better. It is important that an artist also has time to think. A piece of choreography that you compose in two hours will surely look like it. However, that said, if you don't have the economic means, there will be times when you can't afford to think that way.

That is where I think support money from the government is needed for young artists.

In Latvia, there is ongoing funding support for theater, film and music, but not for contemporary dance. We have to apply for grants for each individual project, and when the performances are over, that is the end of the funding. It is not the kind of ongoing support needed to nurture young artists. That is part of the reason we chose to do a long-term project that had events held each month during our European Capital of Culture year.

Is there a lot of exchange going on now between the Baltic countries?

There is some movement, but not much in the way of real exchange. There is a more regular exchange with Estonia and some collaboration in terms of co-production and guest performances.

In 2018, the three Baltic countries celebrate the 100th anniversary of their first independence. As part of the celebrations we are doing our first co-production with Estonian and Latvian artists. They chose to focus their collaboration on the fate of the Livonian, a minority ethnic group that used to live along the Baltic coast in Latvia and Estonia but now is practically extinguished. What is interesting is that these young artists do not so much focus on issues on national identity in this case, but ask a far more philosophical question: if disappearing is always a tragedy?

Being the independence Centennial, there will surely be some re-questioning of the national identities, won't there?

Yes and no. I don't think we have a particularly healthy attitude towards this issue in Latvia. We often tend to look to the past and cling to some happy myths instead of facing the current reality of a changing world. I think it's partly because as a country we have felt small and fragile. The memory of Soviet occupation, the damage it caused, the fears of Russia are still there. The abrupt change to a market economy in the 1990s quickly split people that felt so united during "the Singing revolution" in

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1991. And now there is a whole new generation that was born after 1990 and have only known a free, democratic country. It's quite a mix of values.

Are there many artistic works with strong political messages in Latvia today?

There are some in theater, but almost none in dance. I feel that there is no real awareness in the artistic community that theater could or should be part of politics, unless on a personal level. There are a few younger and mid-career artists that work around current political and social issues because they see that it concerns them directly, which is in fact the best motivation. But these are individuals; it is not a direction many would explore. It is probably the influence and result of the education in arts. I think that our festival Homo Novus tries to bring a different view there also. A lot of the work that is presented in our Homo Novus festival has a political message, and Latvian audiences appreciate that kind of work very much.

Are there any Latvian artists that you have special expectations for going forward?

There is Kristine Brinina who has done collaborations with contact Gonzo and various other artists and makes very empathetic work on her own. Also Krisjanis Sants, who came back to Latvia after graduating from P.A.R.T.S. (the Rosas dance school in Belgium) and made a brilliant first work for the Homo Novus festival in 2015.

Do you believe that artists should by nature be independent?

Yes, I believe so. But their independence should be valued and supported. I also believe it is no longer the era of structures (dance companies) in a hierarchical sense, it's more about collaborations and co-habiting.

Are there collaborations between ethnic dance and contemporary dance?

Almost none. Foreign choreographers often ask me the same question. It is interesting to me that outsiders ask that. My feeling is that folk dance is so present, people still practice it a lot, there is a whole infrastructure for that, so there is no need to pursue it in the contemporary dance context. Maybe we don't have the necessary distance to it. Foreigners are surprised when they hear that almost everyone in Latvia knows how to do our folkdance (laughs).

Do [good-sized] audiences come to see the performances of contemporary dance artists you invite from other countries?

Yes, but we work for that. It also depends on the place, as audiences in Riga seem to be loyal to venues. If you present some artist in the Opera house, you will get opera audience that would otherwise never come for the same artist in an abandoned factory. Or vice versa. I remember a dumb type production in our Opera many years ago and it was sold out even though no one knew them.

Finally, I would like to ask you what your policy as a curator/producer is going forward.

I wouldn't have one answer, but it is very much about connecting to what is going around, the international and local context and how to bring those together, how to go

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to unfamiliar territories, and I don't mean this only geographically. How do we create generosity towards and between artists and audiences? This time, I came to Japan as a visiting fellow for a program by The Saison Foundation and I went, among other things, to the Dance Box in Kobe. I liked how they included music and poetry projects and freely mixed disciplines. Or how the Arts Center in Kinosaki had the policy of 24-hour access for residency artists. It is such an inspiring attitude that puts artists and creativity in the center and works from there. And you also feel a warm vibe in these places. It's a generosity of spirit that I felt present in most art places I visited in Japan and that I will bring home with me.