

CHILDHOOD IN CHILDREN THEATRES OF LATVIA SINCE 1991

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Abstract

The article focuses on Latvian schools' theatre repertoire from 1991 to today. The study aims at analysing school theatre movement in Latvia over the span of 30 years to reveal (1) how the repertoire of school theatres meets children's educational needs, and (2) how the repertoire of school theatres communicates childhood concerns. The article defines four dimensions of the analysis of school theatre repertoire: (1) educational goals of school theatres; (2) production budgets; (3) stage and technical facilities; (4) selection of play genres. The study pools in the data from programmes of 40 school theatre festivals, media publications, photographs, theatre festival regulations and video materials from shows at theatre festivals. The study reveals that the repertoire of school theatres is in line with the educational needs of children only in part, i.e. that creativity prevails over technical constraints. Likewise, a certain "monopoly" of local writers, which affects the boundaries of childhood cultural space is worth mentioning. Additionally, the study suggests that repertoire of school theatres should address childhood realities more convincingly in the future.

Keywords: school theatre, theatre pedagogy, children theatre repertoire, children's theatre festivals

1. INTRODUCTION

Latvia became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1940, and with the Soviet dictatorship continuing after World War II, school theatres got conditioned by Soviet ideology, censorship and centralisation of education (Kestere 2017). In 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of national independence, Latvia experienced significant changes not only in its political system, but also in the social processes and, eventually, in the mindset. Since the 1990s, cultural and educational values have changed in Latvia, and currently rest on four fundamental values of the European Union – economic activities of free, intelligent people, democratic political system and the search for a quality education system (Hausmanis & Kūle 2013). Latvia's national strategic documents mention four essential values - participation, creativity, tolerance and cooperation, which increase the value of the common human capital of every person individually and of Latvia as a whole (The Saeima 2011). Theatre arts vividly expose the existing social values. The restoration of Latvia's independence allowed defining theatre values and provided a future perspective. With the strictures of censorship and coercive ideology dismantled, the spirit of hope and freedom entered the theatre environment. Theatres could start planning their own repertoire (Hausmanis 2013). The repertoire of Latvian professional theatres shows traces of refocusing on previously prohibited and censored topics, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, or a combination of reality and irreality scenes and the interaction of real actors with non-existent beings (Akuratere 2007).

The limited body of research on the repertoire of Latvian school theatre after the 1990s allows determining the gap in the existing studies and accounts for the novelty of this research. Moreover, the implementation of the education reform project "Competence Approach to Curriculum" (School2030) and the introduction of a new study subject - Theatre Arts - at school, as well as a growing interest in socially and culturally contextualised childhood, for instance, Norozi and Moen's (2016) research on childhood as a social construct (Ali Norozi, Moen 2016) showcase the topicality of the given research. The practical experience gained through the delivery of the study subject of theatre art also confirms the topicality of the study: in January 2021, theatre art teachers, functioning also as stage directors, were surveyed to determine the respondents' assessment of the introduction of theatre arts at school, with one of the questions targeting teaching materials (incl. school theatre repertoire); and 62% of teachers mentioned the lack of teaching materials, while the rest of teachers' answers were related to distance learning and the large number of students in the classroom. Several theatre educators acknowledged the

need for plays targeting adolescents, but problems arise in classes where students have to create their own text.

One of the cornerstones of theatrical art is its repertoire. It is the choice of the repertoire that determines how interested the participants and the audience will be in the performance, and how personally engaging the work in the production will become. Therefore, it is important that the theatre's repertoire is designed to better meet the interests of students. It is important to choose relatable themes, so that the events in the play are emotionally engaging for theatre participants (Ulrich 2019). The importance of school theatre repertoire is also confirmed by research on repertoire issues, for example, on what determines the director's decision to stage a particular play (Schaller 2017).

The study aims at analysing school theatre movement in Latvia over the span of 30 years to reveal (1) how the repertoire of school theatres meets children's educational needs, and (2) how the repertoire of school theatres communicates childhood concerns.

The research is based on Latvian education policy documents, while the theoretical frame is established by the research in the theory of theatre arts. The term "theatre art" refers to an art form based on the dramatic realization of dramatic works or artistic intentions in the form of a public performance using verbal and non-verbal means of expression (Geikina 2020). The forms and genres of theatre art are wide-ranging. The most common theatre art genres are drama, tragedy, comedy and melodrama (Iwuchukwu 2008). Theatre art brings together various arts, such as music, dance, scenography. It is important that theatre art centres on a person with his individual voice and movement (Schonmann 2002). Initially, children can learn the specific means of expression of theatre art (speech, movement, facial expressions, etc.) in school theatres. The aim of school theatres is to promote the formation and development of a free, creative, harmonious, responsible and civically engaged personality, as well as to strengthen the cultural identity of school theatre participants and to offer an insight into other peoples' cultures (NCE 2016). In theatre art classes, students should develop communication skills for collaboration with different audiences and experience the process of creating a new artistic work (Skola2030). The creative process in school theatres can also develop through various games. Games are an element of culture, which represent reality - events, processes, norms of behaviour. Through play, a reality is created that develops students' social, emotional and intellectual skills (Schonmann 2002). In school theatres, the representation of reality is related to topics that are interesting and topical for children. The participants of school theatres are students - children. Law on the Protection of the Children's Rights states that a child is a person who has not reached the age of 18 (Saeima 1998), thus in the given study the term "childhood" means the stage of human life up to 18 years.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Following the aim of the research and building on the analysis of the existing research, four dimensions were defined, in which the analysis of school theatre repertoires was performed: (1) educational goals of school theatres, (2) production budgets (Hishon 2016), (3) stage and technical facilities (Hishon 2016), (4) selection of play genres.

The analysis of the repertoire of Latvian school theatres from 1991 to 2021 is a longitudinal case study. The methodological assumptions are based on the data from forty programmes of eight Latvian school theatre festivals (see Figure 1.). Six venues of theatre festivals have been chosen to cover the territory of Latvia to the greatest extent possible. The study analysed a total of 314 performances staged over 30 years in school theatres. The second set of research sources comprises articles in the press, which contain the feedback from the spectators. The third set of sources contains 15 theatrical performances from the Youth Theatre Festival "Bear of Fortune" (covering the period from 2013 to 2014). The fourth set of sources used in the study is represented by five regulations of Latvian school theatre festivals.

Research procedure: (1) the repertoire of forty Latvian school theatre festival programmes was analysed according to the criteria - theatre team, director, play title and author, play genre and age of theatre team members. It must be concluded that not in all cases it was possible to obtain information on the age of theatre members, thus, this aspect is not taken into account in the study, but opens up more opportunities

for future research related to the school theatre repertoire. (2) The articles in the press targeting the above-mentioned school theatre festivals (list of theatre festivals Figure 1.) were selected and analysed, thus allowing to obtain the most important insights of the authors of the articles regarding the repertoire chosen by theatre groups. (3) 15 theatre performances have been observed, emphasizing three aspects - the stage of the performance, costumes and stage decoration and technical solutions (light, sound). (4) The photographs of performances available on theatre websites and holding the visual image of the performance (costumes and stage props), have been reviewed. (5) All data obtained in the research have been summarized, structured and analysed, summarizing the answers and drawing conclusions, as well as defining further research opportunities.

The study focuses exclusively on the repertoire of Latvian school theatre. The data from the repertoire of foreign ensembles participating in international children's and youth theatre festivals have not been used in the study. All Latvian school theatre festival programmes, video materials, theatre festival regulations, photos and articles in the press are publicly available on the websites of school theatres, educational institutions or municipalities.

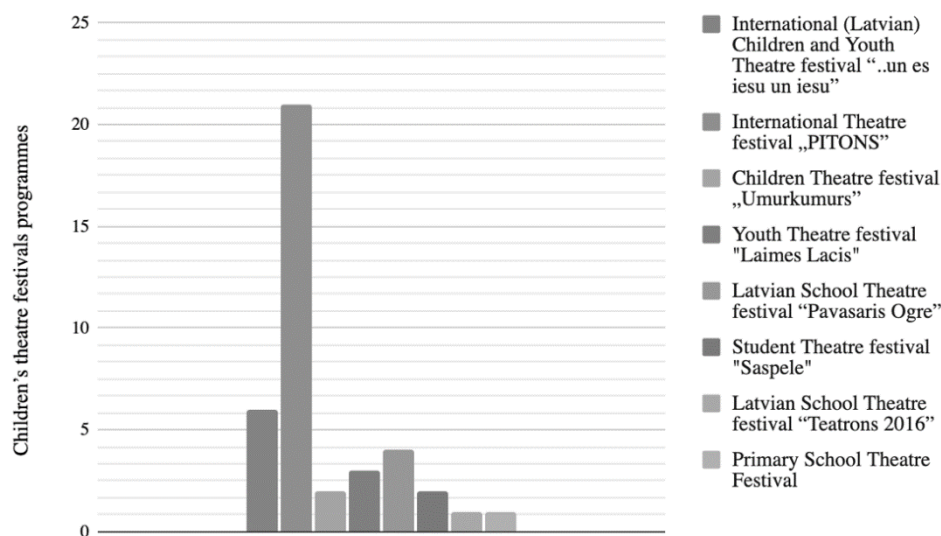


Figure 1. Latvian school theatre festival programmes

Source: The programmes of Latvian school theatre festivals (1991.-2021.)

3. RESULTS

3.1. School theatre movement (1991-2021)

The repertoire of Latvian school theatres after the restoration of Latvia's independence can be described as very diverse, with theatre groups staging recent dramatic works, world and Latvian classics, as well creating their own texts. However, it must be admitted that in the studied period the works of the same authors - plays - are repeatedly staged.

From 1991 to 2014, the International Theatre Festival "Python" took place. The festival took place every year in Dobele (a city located 76 km from the capital Riga), in the middle of summer - in July. The study analyses the programme of the 21st International Theatre Festival "Python". The festival as a whole is dominated by works by Latvian playwrights - 87% of the festival's repertoire is plays by Latvian authors and only 13% of all productions are works by foreign authors. The festival has no repertoire limitation, old classics or works by modern authors, poetry or movement performances are staged (Saulīte 2006). International school theatre festivals also promote the staging of works by Latvian playwrights elsewhere in the world. For example, a theatre group from Lithuania participated in the 15th International Theatre Festival “Python” in 2005, but a year later in 2006 they brought to the festival

“Python” the play “Dusi saldi” by Hermans Paukšs. The Lithuanian director and students liked the play the previous year and staged it (Saulīte 2006). Since 1997, the folk theatre “Vējlukturis” of Jelgava Secondary School No. 4 working under the guidance of directors Hermans Paukšs and Jānis Ulmanis has also been participating in the festival. For seven years in a row, the ensemble has been participating in the theatre festival with plays created by H. Paukšs, thus confirming a certain monopoly of one author.

One of the oldest secondary school theatres in Latvia is the Valmiera Viesturs Secondary School Folk Theatre “Sprīdītis”. Since 2008, the theatre has been organizing the Latvian Children's and Youth Theatre Festival “... un es iešu un iešu! / ... and I will go and will go!” (The festival has been named the International Children's and Youth Theatre Festival “... and I will go and I will go!” since 2018). In the first years of its history, the performances of the theatre festival programme were not put in parallel sessions, however, in recent years, performances have been played simultaneously in two or even three places. The Children's and Youth Theatre Festival “... and I will go and will go!” organized by Valmiera Viesturs Secondary School has become a central event in the school theatre season, because in recent years, theatre ensembles have to send a video with a recording of the show in order to be considered for the participation in the festival and only after the commission 's approval, the team is invited to participate in the festival.

Every 5 years, the National Centre for Education (NCE) organizes school theatre festivals - parades where school theatre groups are invited by the festival jury. The last school theatre parade took place in 2016 in two Latvian cities - Valmiera and Liepāja. The Latvian school theatre parade “Teatrons 2016” (in Valmiera) gathered more than 20 school theatre groups from Latvia. The repertoire of the theatre parade contained 80.6% productions by Latvian authors. The representatives of the festival jury praised the performance of Druviena's young actors and praised the choice of the play, which targeted a topical issue among teenagers - the treatment of their body and body hygiene. The festival jury praised both the costumes of the show and the sound (Zirne 2016).

3.2. Factors determining school theatre repertoire

The repertoire of school theatres is influenced by several factors. First of all, it is a theatre ensemble and its composition. This is a peculiarity of children's and youth ensembles - after a few years of operation, the composition of participants changes dramatically, as students grow up (Saulite 2009) and leave school, their interests and wishes may change over time. School theatre directors need to be able to adapt to these changing circumstances. The composition of the school theatre ensemble also determines the director's educational goals in relation to the theatre participants. Educational goals are considered in research on aesthetic education (Schaller 2017), communication (Wiechers, 2016), development of discipline and responsibility (Wagner 2020).

Secondly, one of the factors in selecting a particular work for stage adaptation is the financial resources and the possibilities of the theatre. The salaries of school theatre directors are paid from the municipal budget, as well as the amount of the theatre budget depends on the specific municipality, educational institution or culture centre under which the particular team operates. School theatre directors can seek additional opportunities to attract funding. One such option is to participate in a project competition held by the State Culture Capital Foundation (SCCF). For several years, the SCCF had a special objective programme “Development of Children's and Youth Theatre”. Thus, for example, in 2003 the programme supported the staging of several school theatre performances (in the 1st project competition a total of 18,000 LVL (25,612 EUR)) were allocated. The aim of the SCCF programme “Amateur Theatre” was to support the amateur theatre movement, and thus, in 2008 the SCCF supported two theatre festivals - 18 International Theatre Festival “Pythons” with funding of 550 LVL (783 EUR) and Latvian Children's and Youth Theatre Festival “... and I will go and go! ” with funding of 250 LVL (356 EUR) (Latvijas vēstnesis/ Latvian Gazette 2008). The Latvian state support for school theatres has not disappeared, however, it would be necessary today for the SCCF to renew the targeted programmes that would support the school theatre movement.

Thirdly, the choice of repertoire is determined by the available stage. Currently, most school and theatre festivals take place in the premises of schools or culture centres, where technical possibilities are limited. One of the venues of the festival organized by Valmiera Viesturs Secondary School is one of the

professional Latvian theatres Valmiera Drama Theatre, which opens wide range of technical possibilities in theatre performances, apart from use of sound and light, for example, at the beginning of the show, a stage curtain can be opened and thus, the spectators when entering the hall do not yet see the scenography of the show, if it is necessary. At the theatre festival "... and I will go and go!" in 2018, three stages of Valmiera Drama Theatre were used - the Large, Small and Round halls. The professional theatre as a venue for school theatre festivals not only opens up technical opportunities, but also creates a greater sense of responsibility and self-confidence for the members of the theatre team. Generally, the director and the team must be able to adapt very quickly, without prior rehearsal, to the festival stage, usually limited to one hour (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Scene from Anna Brigadere's fairy tale play "Sprīdītis" performed by Valmiera Viesturs Secondary School Theatre "Sprīdītis" in 2018.

Source: Website of Valmiera Viesturs Secondary School Theatre "Sprīdītis"

Fourthly, the factor influencing the repertoire of school theatres is the choice of drama genres. The professional theatre repertoire is influenced by the audience and their wishes. Almost every other theatre visitor would prefer to visit comedies (Baltic Institute of Social Sciences 2008). In turn, the choice of the repertoire of school theatres is influenced by all three factors mentioned above, which also determine the choice of the play genre. Hence, it is not primarily affected by the demand of the audience as it is in professional theatres. In addition to the composition of the acting troupe, finances and stage availability, the educational goals set for school theatres are important, as they influence the selection of school theatre genres determined by the theatre arts programme, namely to learn comedy and tragedy in grades 7-9 and other forms and genres of theatre art in secondary school (School2030).

As Figure 3 demonstrates, the repertoire of school theatres is dominated by the following genres: drama (48.1%), fairy tale productions (26.1%), farce and absurd plays (12.1%), poetry performances (5.7%), comedies (4.5%), musicals and dance performances (1.9%) and tragedies (1.6%).

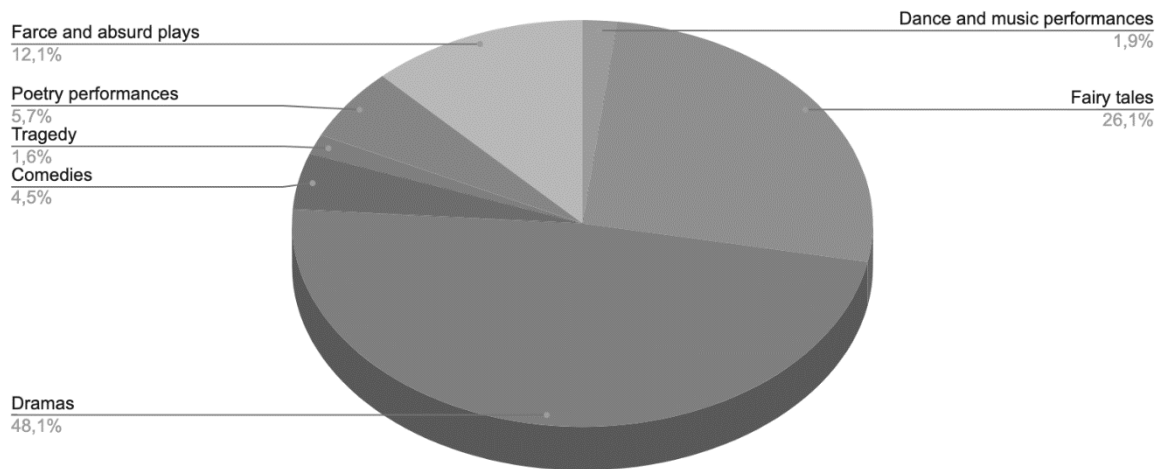


Figure 3. Performances at Latvian school theatre festivals (types of dramaturgy)

Source: Latvian school theatre festival programmes (1991-2021)

The repertoire of school theatres is also influenced by current events in society: for example, in 2018, marking the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia, changes in genres were observed in theatrical troupes - more staging of Latvian classics or Latvian folk tales, as well as poetic performances.

Another important factor in choosing a genre is fashion trends: for example, at the turn of the century, in 2000, the repertoire of school theatre was made up of dramas or tragedies associated with the death of a witch, a vampire or the end of the world.

As can be seen, fairy tales play an important role in the repertoire of school theatres - this is also confirmed by the 1st Primary School Pupils Theatre Festival of 2020, where 95% of the repertoire was fairy tales (the festival took place only one day, because in Latvia on March 13, 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic emergency cancelled the programme of the second day of the theatre festival). Fairy tale productions make it much easier for theatre directors to divide roles, adapt dramatic material to the abilities and needs of their ensemble, but do not address reality issues related to primary school children. The fairy tale productions do not reveal the true "reality" of childhood, children thoughts and feelings of today.

The 15 performances of the 1st Youth Theatre Festival "Bear of Fortune" (2013) and 2nd Theatre Festival (2014) were analysed for the stage, technical solutions for costume and stage decorations (light, sound). 93% of the two-year festival programme consists of works by Latvian authors, but only 7% of world classics. The stage adaptation of W. Shakespeare's play "Over the Times" performed by the theatrical troupe of Sigulda Art School "Baltais Flīģelis" is especially noteworthy, the bright stage image is enhanced by a well-thought-out concept of light, which, of course, is related to the fact that the troupe performs on their own theatre stage and the director knows the stage possibilities. It must be concluded that 86% of all performances use sound elements in the performance (musical accompaniment, songs or phonograms), however, only 28% of all performances use stage lights purposefully. The remaining 72% of the show light is static from start to finish. A vivid example of purposeful and artistically accurate use of light and sound is the production of Rūdolfs Blaumanis' literary tale "Little Devils" by the musical theatre troupe of Riga Children's and Youth Centre "Altona". The show features a number of songs performed by members of the theatre ensemble, as well as specific scenes enhanced by the play of light, such as the underground scene, during which mechanical movements, sharp and rhythmic sound, and dark red light create the appropriate atmosphere. The regulations of the youth theatre festival "Bear of Fortune" state that the performances will be performed at the Art School "Baltais Flīģelis", where there

is a stage with certain restrictions (for example, there is no backstage). The video recordings demonstrate that all theatre teams have adapted to the limitations of the hall and developed creative solutions.

3.3. Authors represented in the school theatre repertoire

Figure 4 demonstrates that the 30-year repertoire of school theatres is dominated by classics of Latvian literature (16.6%), works of world classics (13.4%), plays by playwright Hermans Paukšs (13.4%) and texts created by school theatres themselves (11.8 %). The category “other authors” (44.9%) includes authors whose works have been staged once or twice (including adaptations of novels), for example, plays by Latvian playwrights D. Grīnvalds, L. Stumbres, L. Gundars, P. Putniņš.

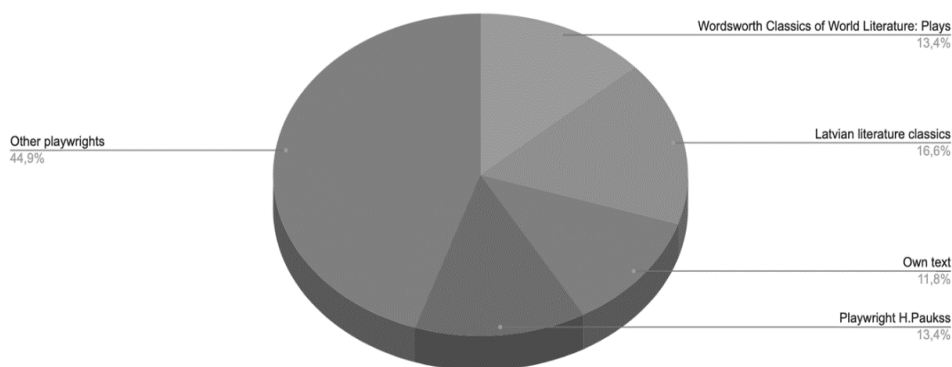


Figure 4. Authors represented in the repertoire of Latvian school theatre festivals

Source: Latvian school theatre festival programmes (1991-2021)

The repertoire of school theatres specifically showcases one playwright - Hermanis Paukšs. H.Paukšs' adaptations constitute 13.4% of the entire repertoire of Latvian school theatres. School theatres favour H.Paukšs' plays because of the author's style with the paradoxical representation of life, a tendency to the absurd, exaggeration and avoidance of everyday reflection (Saulite 2006). H.Paukšs' plays are characterized by a very ironic, somewhat paradoxical narrative. In his plays, reality mixes with irreality. Several of his plays are like a dream. The author also uses the techniques of absurd drama (Hausmanis 1999). Undeniably, not everyone has such an unequivocally positive take at H.Paukšs' plays. The author's plays are characterized by a lyrical mood, elements of affection, paradox, reckless humour, sometimes grotesque, however, the artistic development of the plays is often insufficient (Vite 2003).

The choice of the represented authors indicate that the participants of school theatre have limited access to knowledge about world theatre trends and dramatic works. Almost every eighth adaptation in the school theatre repertoire is performed on H.Paukšs' plays, which are attractive, sometimes even fun for the school theatre participants themselves, but marginalize the educational function of school theatre, namely, do not enhance students' knowledge in world cultural history and theatre art history and do not provide insights into childhood realities of other countries. The works of world-famous authors make up only 13.4% of the repertoire of student theatres. However, their choice is diverse and respectable: for example, the first theatre festival "Python" began in 1991 with the works of world-famous playwrights, the poster reads the words of George Orwell, Albert Kami, Harold Pinter. The International Festival is far from modest, on the contrary - in addition to the most frequently played Latvian authors H.Paukšs and A.Zeibots, there are also plays by A.Eglītis, K.Skalbe and world classics W.Shakespeare, A.Strinberg (Saulite 2010).

The study on the selection of authors also points to the situation in original drama in Latvia: at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, there was a lack of playwrights and good original plays (Hausmanis 2013). This can really be seen in the repertoire of school theatres, where almost no recent Latvian plays are staged. Playwright Dainis Grīnvalds (1950-2013) actively organized competitions for playwrights at the beginning of the 21st century, also at the theatre festival "... and I will go and will go!" thus introducing school theatre directors to the latest plays and facilitating the networking of playwrights and directors.

During 30 years, the theatrical troupes have written numerous plays themselves, especially the theatre of Jūrmala State Gymnasium. In 2016 (11.5%) and 2018 (8.7%) of all productions are the texts written by the ensembles themselves, which can be explained by the centenary of the Latvian state in 2018 and the theatre festival parades. If in 2016 only 11.5% of works by Latvian authors were staged in school theatres, then in 2018 the number has almost tripled, reaching 30.4%. School theatre groups also choose to stage musical or book pots, where they have to create the dramaturgical material of the show themselves. For example, in 2001, a speech coach and actress staged O. Wilde's fairy tales, creating her own dramaturgical material. The visual image of the stage is gorgeous and rich, especially the costumes of the actors (see Figure 5).

The examination of the authors represented in the repertoire of school theatre provides an opportunity for further research, which would also promote the opportunity of school theatre practitioners - theatre directors to get acquainted with the works of authors unknown to them. Special attention should be paid to the study of Herman Paukšs' art in school theatre. At present, the association "Playwrights Association" has made an extensive contribution to the collection of plays by Latvian playwrights on its website (www.lugas.lv), where it is possible to get acquainted with the works of playwrights represented by the association - play descriptions.

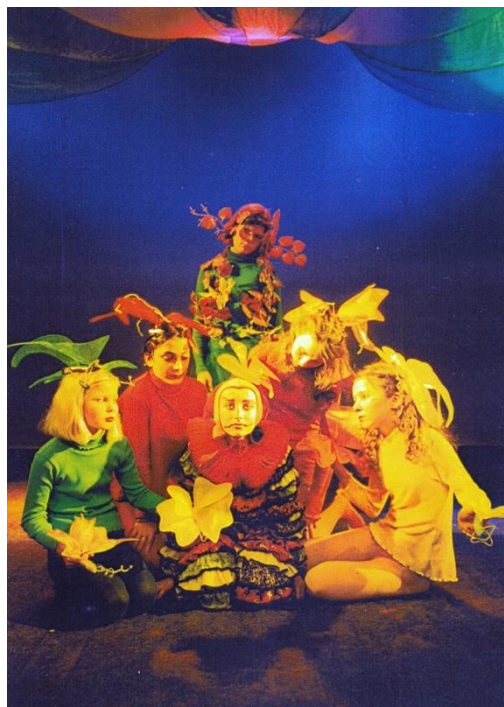


Figure 5. Scene from Z.Daudziņa's dramatization "Princess and the Dwarf", based on O. Wilds' fairy tale "Infante's Birthday" performed by Jūrmala Children's Theatre.

Source: Jurmala Children's Theatre website

3.4. School theatre repertoire during the Covid-19 pandemic

Existing processes in the world and the beginning of the global Covid-19 pandemic have also affected the repertoire of Latvian school theatres. From March 2020 (with a two-month exception), school theatres in Latvia work remotely. School theatre directors are looking for new forms for their performances using digital technologies. In the spring of 2021, the XIV Latvian Children's and Youth Theatre Festival "... and I will go and will go!" was held remotely. The festival procedure was changed that year - school theatre participants had to make a video on the topic - an event in my life. The concept of the festival having determined that the dramatic material of the video has to be created by the young people themselves, also markedly changes the school theatre repertoire and marks a new stage in the repertoire of Latvian school theatre, when students talk and think about what is important and relevant, thus revealing childhood reality.

4. DISCUSSION

Studying the repertoire of Latvian school theatres since 1991, two issues emerge that open up further opportunities for school theatre research. (1) Would an increase in the budget of school theatres also significantly change the repertoire of school theatres? This would mean that themes that dominate the repertoire of school theatres, such as fairy tale or classical drama productions, would be replaced by other types of dramatic material or the existing repertoire would be improved with broader technical solutions. (2) Butler's essay (Butler 1988) highlights the problem of the distribution of the male and female roles in theatre performances. In recent years, this has also become an issue in the repertoire of school theatres, namely whether directors should stick to the distribution / instruction of playwrights when staging plays, or whether roles can be performed by any member of the theatre team, regardless of gender.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the 1990s, the Latvian school theatre had a turning point, as Latvia regained its independence and freed itself from Soviet ideology and censorship, and new opportunities arose to improve the creative potential of school theatres. The most active directors of school theatres organize the first International Theatre Festivals, which brings together theatre art teachers and directors. In the following years, Latvian school theatre festivals are developing vigorously.

The study analysed the movement of school theatres in Latvia during 30 years. The repertoire of school theatre is built on dramas, fairy tales, farce and absurd plays. The school theatre repertoire represents childhood through Latvian folk tales and classic texts by Latvian playwrights. The repertoire of school theatres also includes texts created by the groups themselves - directors or theatre members. Drama as a genre sometimes marks childhood themes (first love, daily occurrences) in the theatre repertoire. However, the repertoire of school theatre does not reveal the "reality" and topicalities of childhood, i.e. the repertoire is dominated by fairy tale productions, the stories of which can be found in fantasy and imagination, nor in the reflection of reality. This would be an issue that should be taken into account in the future when choosing a play for a performance.

The study reveals that the repertoire of school theatre only partially meets the educational needs of children. It is positive that school theatre, when choosing to stage a repertoire, is not primarily concerned with technical solutions, such as light, sound or space. Theatre teams are able to creatively adapt to different situations and technical opportunities. It is important that the choice of school theatre repertoire is not conditioned by technical solutions, but technical limitations are compensated by the creativity and originality of directors and theatre groups. The choice of authors of productions shows that the repertoire of school theatre is based on the works of Latvian playwrights. This limits students' wider opportunities to get to know the world cultural space, especially if it is narrowed down by the childhood vision of one particular Latvian author.

The school theatre has both educational and artistic goals; and a gifted and knowledgeable director, together with enthusiastic theatre participants, can achieve these goals in high-quality artistic performances that are relevant to children.

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