

Antanas Venckus, November 19, 2015

Mr. Venckus's Informal remarks before the interview:

My opinion, though it might sound strange, is that the initiator of the basic idea [for the festival], Gytis Padegimas, was more of a symbolic figure of defiance. I mean that as the senior play director, he worked as part of a team that was brought together and which did things like publishing those [festival] newspapers, at night, so that reviews were published the next morning. This was something that happened in Lithuania only in the period between the wars. For example as I already mentioned, Sruoga liked to use code names to sign articles. One would discredit something in the article and the other would hear of it and respond and this would stir up discussion. And in this way the contribution of Didžgalvis was gigantic, [he organized] the entire program of "Morning Reflections" [Ryto Mintys], etc. How should I say it? There was a team put together from the theater that was very strong I think. And everyone was hungry for possibilities, and about the idea of Lithuanianness that was spreading throughout the country. And I especially enjoyed being in a position where I saw a lot of sincere patriotism and the sincere desire to elevate ourselves and to really understand the times, and where we were, and what Lithuanian theater was, alongside all of those wonderful things like the night readings, etc. Things were happening 24 hours a day. The festival performances were given, and after that, the "Night Poetry" that was read by all of those who had arrived from everywhere, and the "Morning Reflections," where academics, philosophers, specialists in literature and theater, like Zaborskaite and all the others, very many others---you'll find it all in those materials you have. I can say also that everyone was then optimistic, but for me, looking at things from a perspective of today, I liked the fact that we attempted to be genuine, not to lie, to analyze things critically and openly. And of course soon afterward there began to be some who suffered because of that.

Biographical Questions:

I was born in Lithuania, Raseiniai district. Everything's written in *Who's Who in Lithuania*. I went to school at _Arlaviškiu primary school, then at Vidukle middle school. I finished school at Taurage school no. 2, then enrolled in 1973 at what was then called a Conservatory but is now the Theater and Music Academy, and graduated from in 1977. I've lived in Siauliai since 1977. I've worked as an actor from 1977 until today. And from 1996 until July of 1998 I worked as the theater manager, and since then I've been Director (vadovas) of the [Šiauliai] theater. All in one place, so to speak. In 1988 I was an actor. And I acted the title role in the festival production, staged by Padegimas, *Zilvinas*. Jasukaityte's play.

Interview:

[Interviewer: What do you remember about the Atgaiva Festival?]

I was, so to speak, on a team. We worked all together, how does one explain? Working on organizational matters were several people, with the nucleus being, as far as I recall, Pranas Piauokas, and Valentinas Didžgalvis without a doubt, who recruited the university instructors and published our [festival] newspaper, and artists, and Juozas Bindokas the photographer and, one could say, the chronicler. I worked with all of them. So I was everything—organizer, participant, spectator. I remember, day and night, I read poetry and attended many of the. . . [interruption]

I was so to speak, one of the nucleus that worked on the festival, and I was also the chairman of the Šiauliai branch of the Union of Theater Professionals at the time. And I was a performer, acting in a festival play, and I was a presenter of “Night Poetry” [Nakties poezija], I listened to all of the lectures, I saw all of the performances—we pretty much lived in the theater.

[Interviewer: And which festival activity did you like the most?]

I was in such an emotional state that. . . we didn’t separate them. There was a certain euphoria, clearly.

[Interviewer: So as a person who was involved in everything, what did you experience during the festival?]

There were a great many beautiful things of all sorts. There was the work of Tuminas coming on the scene at the time, I believe *There’ll be no Death Here* [Čia nebus mirties]. I’m a fan of Tuminas as a director, but haven’t been lucky enough to work with him, though we’ve tried. There was a lot, but you know, here’s something. Now, when a festival happens, people come and perform and leave and you don’t see the work of your colleagues. But at Atgaiva there was that opportunity. The city was turned on, the actors lived here, and participated in the “Morning Reflections” [Ryto mintys] and the night readings, it was non-stop, and only after the ten days I could sit and catch my breath—and argue meaninglessly about who got credit.

[Interviewer: You mean, about who did what better?]

Well not necessarily who did better, but who was more significant. I was then comparatively young, I had only been in the theater for 11 years. I had this fire in me. There must be justice I thought, truth!

[You were somewhat young and green?]

I won’t deny it.

[Interviewer: What events did the public respond to most?]

All of them. Students would come from Vilnius to attend the “Morning Reflections” [Ryto mintys], held in the little theater, which is now St. Ignatius Church, and there, on the stairs, under the stairs,

they watched, they thought, they talked, they listened. As I said, the intelligentsia gathered here, sometimes they just heard by word of mouth when certain talks were ending and starting. Looking at the materials and schedule from the “Morning Reflections” now I’m struck by the impression that it was self-education and self-improvement for me. These performances and the night poetry were professional matters, but to have these talks also going on enabled me to realize as a person forming his opinions how the cultural processes related to theater in Lithuania worked. The effect on me of “Morning Reflections” was really enormous. For as I said, very enlightened and clear-thinking people participated.

[Interviewer: And the “Night Poetry”?]

The Night Poetry was very good. It was the first time a Šiauliai audience saw Algis Latėnas Strazdas read, a Lithuanian poet with a unique reading style. That made a very strong impression on me. Of course I listened less because I was heard more [as a reader] . . . and Žvakidė [The Candlestick] was performed as a finale in the same little theater, Škėma’s play.

[Interviewer: Which festival events did you yourself organize?]

I was everywhere where I was needed. I received visitors/guests, I presented and introduced Night Poetry events. Our responsibilities were divided up among all of us, we each had something to take care of, a theater or a group, because for three or five people to do all of that just wasn’t possible.

[Interviewer: And what did you take care of?]

I was all day where I was needed and where I was sent, but probably mostly I was with Latėnas because I had to introduce the night poetry, as the host of that event. And one or two theaters, with my team, that I had to meet, escort, and set up with housing, etc. There was plenty of work and we all did everything. As I said, it was only at the end that the idea came out that there were those who were worried about who got the credit and they dared to say something about it. Maybe it wasn’t how someone had hoped. . . .It was something I learned from.

[Interviewer: But you hadn’t had events like this one before.]

There were other festivals. There were. But not of this kind, consisting of purely national dramaturgy. And not with such a broad program. They were simply done with people arriving, performing and leaving after dinner or whatever. But this was *the event of a lifetime*. [Venckus’s emphasis]

[Interviewer: And it was ten days long.]

Yes, it was a long marathon. But we all worked together like fingers making a fist; I enjoyed it greatly.

[Interviewer: And why was it decided to make it ten days long?]

Well, look at the program. You see, it's organized to include some of the newest works of necessarily Lithuanian drama. It wasn't like we were including "the best shows of the season" or something like that. It was planned that way, and it was ten days that shook the world!

[And when was this decided, when did the organizational work begin?]

I can't exactly answer that now, but about . . . I don't know when we started. . . I could be wrong, you'll have to check. But I think, really, it was when [national] rebirth began . . . and when there arose that hope that it was actually possible to do things differently, that it was possible to speak—and not just carry a dagger in one's pocket as the theater often successfully did in those days. Today the theater doesn't have much to say because it's lost. Are we representing reality? Are we somehow delving into the human unconscious? And it's still that way, the theater is frightened. But back then it was a very good situation. The subtext resounded and drowned out the actual setting . . . And everyone understood everything, and rejoiced.

[Interviewer: And this festival was purely the work of the Šiauliai people?]

Yes, this was our idea, of course with the blessing of the ministry and of all those who helped, but it was solely the idea of the Šiauliai Theater. I think it began here in connection with things around 1986 and when *perestroika* began in 1985. After that people began to think. . . and there were a few festivals here and there. But our thought was that we needed to have a *national* festival (Venckus's emphasis)—it was the first time that word was pronounced—not just a Lithuanian drama but a *national* drama festival. There's a difference. And we didn't want to simply put on plays. We were a certain kind of mouthpiece. People, as I said, marched into those Morning Reflections sessions to hear things they had never heard before.

[Interviewer: Because it wasn't allowed.]

Well, as I mentioned, it could only be said in a subtext. Now it could be said openly.

[How did others, those from other theaters react?]

They reacted superbly. Everyone who participated loved it. Of course, now almost 20 years have passed, my God. No. More than 20!

[Interviewer: More, 27 years,]

Yes. We had thought and discussed with Gytis to mark the 25th anniversary, but there were all of these elections and re-elections here and we didn't really have the city's approval to even commemorate the event and that it actually happened. Maybe for the 30th anniversary we can. It's certainly possible. Because, how should I say—just realize—27 years ago how old was I? I was 33 years old 27 years ago—the age of Christ. I've matured I think, as an actor I've matured a lot.

[Interviewer: The play directors were all young.]

We were all young then! All were young. And we were waiting. As our parents had waited. For me, as someone who was raised in a rural village, there was another layer. My grandfather was a family farmer, and I began to listen to the Voice of America regularly, at certain hours, with his old *Grundingas* radio—he was a pretty well-to-do farmer—I first read Šapoka’s [Lithuanian] history that was published in ’32. It was given to me on the 500th anniversary of Vytautas’s death. But you couldn’t talk about this. I was a good student in grade school, and one summer—this is just by the way—a history teacher visited—and he said some things about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania according to the history of that time, saying how things were a certain way. Well, I was an unusual student and once I said, “No, it wasn’t that way.” This could make for an argument then. I was called before the principal and he said, “We know what book you’ve been reading. Don’t brag about it.”

I also participated in academic competitions, but I was more interested in the exact sciences—I liked mathematics, physics, chemistry.

[Interviewer: That’s a very different specialty, it seems you have very flexible way of thinking; it’s a very different direction, almost the opposite of theater.]

.....

That’s my character. . . . I’m interested in paradoxes. That’s my personality.

[Interviewer: Well we can return to our questions. What more can you say about the situation then in Šiauliai?]

I just think that, well, there wasn’t the type of Communism that people sometimes talk about.

Communism in principle, and how it worked here locally, through its functionaries, well, it wasn’t a mutiny. Sure we were watched. Sure we already knew in those days, who worked for the KGB in the theater, and we knew what was up even when the thaw started and they brought in the mayor and introduced him to the company. And we saw and knew about those four seats in the theater that we always had to leave open, unsold until the third bell. And among the audience we knew there were some who, for career reasons, cooperated. But how much and how many were malignant, well it was probably everyone.

[Interviewer: And how did they all react to the festival?]

I think they understood the rationale. And if they understood the idea of it, they didn’t have a reason to argue that it wasn’t justified. There was an earthquake in Armenia at that time that fostered a kind of solidarity. And our union of theater professionals in Lithuania, led by Adomaitis at the time. It prompted—how should I say it?—a feeling of support for small nations and peoples. And later we as a

theater union went before the Supreme Court in Moscow to speak up. We had elected Adomaitis for Lithuania and Latvia. . . . That was already a tense moment, it was tense. And when the fall [of the USSR] began in 1990, when our delegation left the meeting or declared what no one had dared to say, then we felt like the first to make the breakthrough. And to tell the truth, we didn't really pay attention then to the possible consequences.

[Interviewer: You weren't afraid then.]

Yes, Jesus, it was "Don't talk this way!" "Don't do this!" But then everybody wanted to all the more!

[Interviewer: More boldly.]

More boldly!

[Interviewer: And after the festival the political situation began to change somewhat?]

Yes, in the political arena we began to approach independence. But as I said, the close of the festival was not very pleasant for me, for me personally. Because then a negative trait of Lithuanians showed itself. There were such conflicts. Not sharing the credit for what happened—it's happening to this day and I hate it. We don't want to acknowledge what we accomplished together. We need to praise what we accomplished together. Then all the theaters, all the Ph.D.s, everyone—maybe even the state authorities—seized that common feeling, that we are a nation that we are a people, that we can accomplish things, that we have something of our own. And after that, there began this, "I did more; he did less; he didn't do anything at all." And it was . . . As I said, Didžgalvis might be able tell you more. He, Valentinas, was really the manager at that time and one of those who did quite a lot then as a leader. I'll repeat, Gytis was more of a symbol, a watchword. As director he carried the flag—he declared that no-fly zone over the theater! A strange thing.

. . . .

But, the show happened. Everything took place as it should have in a normal country. It was not very different from, say, pulling aside a cloak that had been covering our true thoughts. It's like this: our process is supposedly just theater, right? Don't interfere in other areas, right? And here [in this festival] philosophy, and art, and the special form of the theater and the special form of poetry, everything was united, rallied, consolidated into one---into that word itself, "atgaiva." It's a hard word to translate into other languages from Lithuanian.

[Interviewer: Yes and about the name "atgaiva"—how was that arrived at?]

It means like a renewal of the soul, that's what it has to mean. It seems to me it was related to rebirth. I don't want to say for sure, after 27 years it's hard for me remember that discussion. But I do know that we talked and talked and talked and it came to someone's mind, "atgaiva." And it meant

something like getting out of jail, or crawling out from being buried underground. We were all relieved, we could breathe easier. And it seems to me that's the origin of the festival name. And there were other possibilities—like “uprising/resurrection” [prisikėlimas] and all sorts of others. But I really like it a lot.

[Interviewer: It seems more theatrical.]

Well, to me it seems more related to the human condition, the human condition.

[Interviewer: It's not political is it?]

I can't say. It means that your spirit is allowed to come to life or recover. It's like coming out of a coma.

[Interviewer: And how did people appreciate the festival? Did you get responses?]

Very much so. Everybody thanked us. “Something happened in Lithuania,” they said. Something actually happened in Lithuania. And afterward, for some reason I'm not sure why, there were plans I heard, to have a continuation of the festival, perhaps in other cities. But you see, it seemed to some then that it might be too much at once. And afterward when a purely creative phase began, we didn't need to defend our independence, then everything was already clear: we no longer needed to, so to speak, legitimize ourselves, that we actually have a national dramaturgy, or our own thoughts. The necessity no longer existed. I'm jumping around here but I can't say it any other way.

[Interviewer: That's fine, those are hard questions to answer. How did the festival change your views, or did the festival change your views in any way?]

My views? No they didn't change; I was never a party member, I'm a very free and peaceful person. I never participated in elections except elections for the heads of theaters. [laughs] Though I've been invited to stand for election every time to things like City Council—people have said, why not grace our list of candidates? You're a well-known person—I said well yes in the city but in the region?—well it seemed to them I was. No, my views were simply strengthened. If we recall what I've said, that “everything is possible.” It is important to—well how should I say? I'll have to use a platitude: How much freedom does a person have? As much freedom as he himself takes. To what extent can you give me freedom? You can't give that feeling to me. Either I'm free in your view, and with respect to you, or I'm not—no matter who you are, whether you're an editor, or the mayor of the city, or whoever, we have to have a dialogue—not conflict with each other but look for understanding through dialogue. That's freedom. And sometimes those who, like me now, shout loudly that they're free, haven't fully set free their own freedom. It's a paradox, really it is. If you're formed by freedom you can lock yourself up. . . .

[Interviewer: It seems to me I read in an article somewhere that the festival awards committee was not very properly chosen. That it was somehow “unclean” (corrupt). Can you comment on that?]

I’ve probably already answered that question by saying what happened after the festival. What I mean is, because someone felt slighted and unrecognized (unappreciated). Now you’ve got me interested in who was on that commission. I’ll look at it and tell you who was “unclean.”

[It was just something I read in an article, I don’t remember if it was in *Šiaulių Naujienos* or *Kultūros Barai*—but they were even judged pretty negatively.]

The performances? [Interviewer: Yes.] Well, I wasn’t speaking about that but about unbiased interests, that lying about what happened wasn’t necessary. Yes. There were weak plays—even “Žilvinas” itself. I myself acted in it, I should be a fan down to the bone. But Jasukaityte’s take on the future of our people, according to our national myth, didn’t apply to the next day, much less to our future as a people. I can tell you very well what happened with our people, but I’m not Nostradamus. I can’t see what’ll be tomorrow. So there was maybe a weakness in that play. But that was said right away, the next morning. That was a weak play and of course some pride was wounded. Now I’m looking at the committee—you yourself take a look—Valdas Vasiliauskas, he worked at the Ministry of Culture then, the theater department head. Algimantas Adomaitis, Aleksaitė, a critic, Andriuškevičius, an artist, Daunys, Zinatvis, a poet-philosopher, Žilvinas Dautartas, from the Ministry Kadziulytė, she was from the LKPCCK, from the State. Ramunė Marcinkevičiūtė, theater critic, Justinas’s daughter, now Vice-Recotor of the Theater, Music and Film Academy. Samulionis, philologist, Ph.d. Stoškus, philosophy Ph.D. Saulius Šaltenis, playwright, Zalatorius, philosophy Ph.D., Cicėnas who was then the Director of the Siauliai *Aušros* Museum. They judged things and they did everything just fine. Someone wasn’t happy with the committee. But the reviews weren’t written by the members of the committee. The reviews/articles were written overnight by other critics, and they looked at things not as committee members. Of course it might have been easiest to accuse the editor who allowed the writing of a negative article about his patron/boss. This is where we get that negative Lithuanian trait I mentioned. And the whole business is distasteful, it leaves a bad aftertaste.

[Interviewer: So that explains why the reviews of the plays were not very good. It wasn’t like everything was great...]

Yes and that’s a very good thing. For the first time things were not how the party ordered, but how the people viewed them.. This is also Atgaiva! Because before that, everyone staged plays knowing already how they would be reviewed. Or they were told: stage this play but don’t stage that one. And this time, everyone did what? What they needed to do and how they did it was what we got. So you see, they were suddenly free to take courageous views. But some took offense anyway. So that defining purpose of Atgaiva, the purpose of rallying and uniting, fell short—I mean at the end of the festival.

[Interviewer: Perhaps the festival was too long? Ten days?]

No, it wasn't that it was too long, what does too long mean? It wasn't about the number of days, it was about the quality---the basic product was the performance---the performance of the play. And the responses to them were---uneven.

[Interviewer: I've seen that in the press from that time...]

I wouldn't deny that, or as Landsbergis says, who would deny that certain things weren't said? In this case it was for the purpose of belittling the meaning and premise of the whole thing. And that's certainly permitted. You can prophecy from coffee grounds too. Who knows the truth? I prefer reason and feeling. For me, I liked the feeling of those ten days, and that's the most important thing that has stayed with me.

[Interviewer: And what do you remember of the Night Poetry sessions?]

Oh Jesus.

[Interviewer: What time did they begin?]

It was at different times, depending on the length of the play before it. I saw young people, students, who were up well past midnight and got up anyway to attend the "Morning Reflections." You understand things were so prolonged that sometimes the evening readings began at eleven at night.

[Interviewer: They began then.]

Yes, just began then. Sometimes they began at midnight. That means that if the program goes for an hour, then if everyone analyzes and talks over everything that's after the performance, and after everything. Then you look, and at 10 am, everyone's gathered for the "Morning Reflections." To find that motley crew all together in one place in the morning---it's a rare thing.

[Interviewer: And who were the majority of those attending in the morning?]

The same people who came to the performances, the spectators and regular people. Of course most were the intelligentsia and educators. But it was a diverse group of people, very diverse.

[Interviewer: And admission was charged to performances?]

Yes. Yes, how else would it be done? Admission was paid. This wasn't a charity event. [laughs] We had to cover the travel expenses of theater companies. And cover a lot of other expenses, etc.

[Interviewer: Yes. And so to "describe the overall significance of the festival," have you done that?]

I think I've covered that. About the festival's meaning, I don't know for sure what, after such a long time, it would be now. But then, it was infinite. Colossal. It was „atgaiva"! But now, you see, you're already judging it now. You didn't participate, but you've read the literature, its legacy, what it was and happened. It'll be good if you will get things started among those who are still alive—participants. But I strongly suggest you find Didžgalvis.

[Second interviewer: I'm interested and curious about this: I found in the archives, perhaps in Vilnius, what was called a "protest appeal."]

I don't know about that now in detail, but if there was such a proclamation, my signature is on it.

[Second Interviewer: And from where did this protest come?]

From us. It was, you see meant for those who wanted to diminish the meaning of Atgaiva. They wanted to make it like some International Theater Day festival in Šiauliai. And we were already far too deeply invested in the idea and ripe for it—so we couldn't further postpone it somehow. Yes, it might have been this way, that's possible.

[Interviewer: And as you said, this event brought together things not only for the theater; it was more than the theater as well.]

[Second Interviewer: It was mentioned [in the protest] that the political situation at that time necessitated that the festival take place right now.]

Yes, our protest said that. This I do know. For they wanted us to just . . . Like I said, . . . I'm not a historian, that's not my department, I work in the theater. So who knows what exactly was planned. But the intent to combine it with theater day, that's a farce. [Second Interviewer: It would diminish its meaning?] It would absolutely lose its meaning. What would be the meaning of having a festival for international theater day? And of course, it seems to me no one wanted that festival name Atgaiva—or that there would be "atgaiva"—and they didn't want there to be those discussions, those morning discussions.

You see, what happened was a kind of Sajādis meeting. At those "Morning Reflections," matters pertaining to the people of the nation were discussed, of course through the lens of culture, but there was talk there about that which is called freedom. And there were many who wanted to talk too much about that, to shout for a long time about that. Or agitate or provoke, also a strong possibility looking back from a present perspective. Or, for example, to ask—"What will happen, if this happens?"